

Jetpack Envy

The Literary Merits of the Idea in SF

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by

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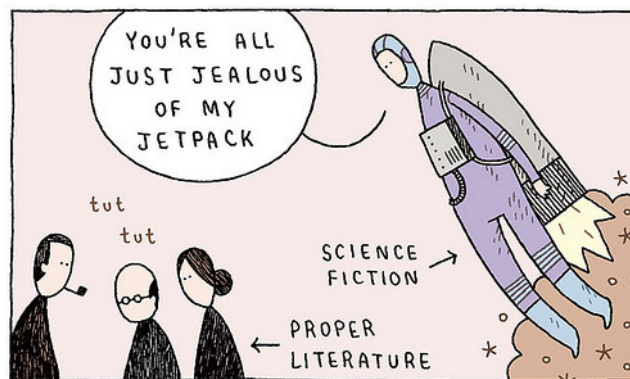


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Abstract

This thesis discusses the literary merits of the science fiction genre through modern genre theory and reception theory, examining what the science fiction genre does that is unique and what it can contribute to the literary discourse, predominantly as a vehicle for examining the ramifications of a given thought experiment as presented within a diegesis.

To this end, I am basing my approach on contributions made by a wide selection of scholars, including John Rieder, Andrew Milner, Ben Bova, and David M. Larson, among others. Subsequently, my intention is to apply the approach outlined to three disparate science fiction novels – *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) by George Orwell, *Snow Crash* (1992) by Neal Stephenson, and *Dune* (1965) by Frank Herbert. Through these novels, I want to demonstrate the function of the idea – or the thought experiment, as it were – in relation to the narrative in science fiction literature, as well as discussing the diversity within the genre.

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Introduction

I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled “science fiction” ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal.
—Kurt Vonnegut (qtd. in Westfahl 329)

The above quote is representative of a stigma long associated with the science fiction genre: unappreciated by critics, cut off from the literary mainstream, unable to showcase their literary merits to the world at large. Despite efforts by both authors and critics to leave this stigma behind, the marginalisation of science fiction still constitutes a significant part of the genre’s reception, for better or worse. Some authors thrive in the knowledge that they do not have to conform to the standards set for mainstream literature, whether high or low; others will chafe under the internal rigours of the field of science fiction despite their work embodying ideas and thoughts that would be warmly received in the mainstream, but the same work will not be treated seriously by the mainstream on account of the setting.

What is the Matter with Science Fiction?

In her introduction to the *PMLA* special issue on science fiction released in May 2004, professor Marleen S. Barr delivered a passionate and emotive defence of the genre in question which, despite its apparently negligible impact on the literary world at large, set out to prove that there was still a lingering stigma surrounding the genre, and that the perpetuation of this type of literary discrimination is to the detriment to the literary debate as a whole. This raises an important question about the reception of science fiction: not only why the animosity towards the genre persists, but where does it come from? There is no readily apparent rationale behind the attempts to sweep the genre under the rug, and yet critics and academia are accused of doing this time and again by science fiction authors and scholars. Some authors will bend and contort the genre spectrum to the unrecognisable to avoid being pigeonholed as an author of science fiction because of this; Kurt Vonnegut, as demonstrated in the quote above, was fairly explicit about why he wanted to be seen as something other than an author of science fiction, and Margaret Atwood has struggled with the genre and her potential association with it, despite her occasional defence of science fiction.

Both Vonnegut and Atwood, who have at various points in time denied writing science fiction and fended off the genre tag with varying success, nevertheless enjoy a higher literary status than those who either cannot avoid or do not seem to mind being labeled as science fiction authors, which raises yet another question: is there a choice involved when it comes to genre? The answer is not uniform for all authors – some may choose the genre they feel

better about writing in from the outset, others will simply write a novel and find the genre tag getting placed on the book by either the author's publisher or critics without any input from the author once the book is released. Regardless, being pigeonholed as a genre author tends to be problematic for the same reasons as being typecast can be stifling for an actor's career; the people on the business side will see you as a one-trick pony and use that as their basis for review, which seems to leave little room for experimentation, and makes open defiance of the stereotype of one's previous work a risky effort. In a world where almost all businesses are becoming increasingly risk-averse already, this is a troubling development. This vilification of versatility is not new, however. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was coerced into writing more works based on Sherlock Holmes, despite growing increasingly tired of Holmes and wishing to do something else, but public demand resuscitated the famous detective.¹

In other words, genre is not always a conscious choice made by the author, and should not be treated as such by default. Yet there are people who seem to believe in an unspoken assumption that writing genre fiction is a choice consciously made by the author, and often at the cost of their potential credibility among the contingent of literature critics that insists on believing that there is a certain way of writing that is objectively better than others, and that certain genres of literature inherently excludes this form of prose. The quote that drove Barr to write her defence of science fiction came from a review of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* in the New York Times written by Sven Birkerts, which sums up in a fairly succinct manner the attitude that science fiction authors and readers commonly refer to when they claim that their genre has been derided by the literary mainstream:

I am going to stick my neck out and just say it: science fiction will never be Literature with a capital 'L,' and this is because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favor of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility. Some will ask, of course, whether there still is such a thing as "Literature with a capital 'L.'" I proceed on the faith that there is. Are there exceptions to my categorical pronouncement? Probably, but I don't think enough of them to overturn it. (Birkerts URL)

It is not surprising to find that authors and readers of science fiction find this quote insulting. However, Birkerts is making a nontrivial error in judgment by suggesting that there is a definite hierarchy of literary elements – more precisely, that “character”, “sensibility” and “moral and psychological nuance” take precedence over “premise”, “scenario” and “more conceptual matters” – but even more damning is his suggestion that science fiction “inevitably” prefers the elements he presumes to be inferior. To assume that certain literary elements are more important than others, as Birkerts does here, is at the very least a peculiarly bold

1 Arthur Conan Doyle actually had Sherlock Holmes killed off at one point, before he was offered \$4 000 per story from *Collier's Magazine* in New York. Source: Kestner, Joseph A. *Sherlock's Men: Masculinity, Conan Doyle and Cultural History*. p. 130. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company. 1997. Print.

assertation, if not an outright wrong one. Certainly, science fiction authors are at a disadvantage when their books are set in worlds – or indeed, galaxies and universes – that differ radically from anything the reader could have ever experienced, in which case the setting and premise might need elaboration for the sake of the reader’s understanding. But then again, if the book is set in a setting that has been established in a previous book, there are plenty of opportunities in a later book for the author to elaborate on character development, ethical and psychological conundrums, and whatever Birkerts means by “sensitivity”.

At this point, one could hypothesise that there would be another critic ready to proclaim that serial novels cannot aspire to become Literature with a capital ‘L’, ostensibly in an attempt to maintain that science fiction cannot enter the realm of credible literature, and quite likely defended with the argument that a good novel has to stand on its own feet without any further context necessary. This argument, some would observe, conveniently ignores works like Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which represents a simple loophole – instead of being a series of novels, it is thought of as one novel in several volumes, and using this loophole would certainly be prudent for any science fiction author who wished to use a novel to establish a universe before exploring the elements Birkerts exalts. One could say that spending a novel’s worth of space establishing a universe is the main problem, referring to the previously mentioned need for autonomy, but this argument shows a narrow-minded approach to literary criticism. Some works, regardless of their literary value, require a certain context, and if that is provided in a preceding novel, then that should not be a problem. There are reputable novels that are based on historical events or a cultural understanding that may very well be outside the average reader’s immediate area of knowledge, but anyone who reads up on such elements to understand a novel with such a historical or cultural backdrop is more likely to receive praise for it than anyone who reads up on a science fiction universe before reading a novel set in that universe.

While this hypothetical novel series argument at a glance seems to be a childish retort unworthy of any respectable literary critic, if we consider the end to which Birkerts’ argument could be the means, the entire debate already appears to be within the realm of the juvenile. The discrimination of an entire genre, by all appearances based on a crude stereotype that has been largely made irrelevant after the New Wave of science fiction garnered mainstream critical acclaim in the 1960s, is patently absurd. Yet despite the juvenile stubbornness, the general feeling among authors of science fiction is that when they attempt to cater to a wider audience, they get little to no recognition for their outreach efforts, and there is little interest from publishers to market the book to a wider demography than the science fiction niche, which could potentially alienate the contingency of science fiction readers who have little interest in reading anything outside of that genre.

Before I proceed, I would like to clarify some terms. Throughout this thesis, I will often resort to the acronym 'sf'. When I do, it can mean any number of things, from 'science fiction' and 'speculative fiction' to 'science fantasy' or 'science fiction and fantasy', but I will also use the full name of the genre if I want to address a specific issue with a specific genre. The reason for this is both to increase association between the genres under the speculative fiction umbrella, and to allow for increased flexibility in some areas where it would be pertinent. The books I have used as primary sources here will largely fall within the purview of science fiction, but as I will demonstrate, influences from other genres often show up in science fiction texts. In other words, the 'sf' acronym is used when genre fluidity has to be taken into account.

Another term that should be explained is the one that gives Barr's essay its title: 'textism'. Barr uses this word according to a definition by Gary Westfahl and George Slusser from *Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization and the Academy*, which Barr defines in the following way: "Textism is a discriminatory evaluation system in which all literature relegated to a so-called subliterate genre, regardless of its individual merits, is automatically defined as inferior, separate, and unequal." (429-30) Barr's rhetoric suggests in no uncertain terms that science fiction is a genre beleaguered by textism. It is beyond my faculties to present any kind of definite proof that there actually exists a textist assault on science fiction, but for the sake of the argument, I will assume that textism against science fiction still exists. That said, I will not speculate on how widespread this kind of textism is. More important than trying to prove the existence of this kind of textism is to prove that sf is not what its detractors claim it is.

Giving Up the Ghost of the Ghetto

The spectre of what many have called the 'science fiction ghetto' still appears to colour the reception of science fiction, and I intend to argue that this is a ghost of the past that neither serves the genre nor literature in general, as it essentially prevents a certain percentage of literature from contributing to the literary discourse, which, regardless of literary qualities, is potentially harmful to this discourse as it undermines the idea that new ideas should be heard. And in a postmodern context, no genre exemplifies literary novum quite like science fiction, at least as far as new ideas are concerned. It is certainly pertinent to ask if this kind of discrimination against science fiction is still a legitimate issue, but proving something like this conclusively at this juncture is, I suspect, far more than simply difficult or time-consuming. Very little concrete evidence can be produced, and this would quite likely not suffice to imply that there is such a thing as the science fiction ghetto, as there is no way to ascertain beyond a shadow of doubt that the discrimination against science fiction is still part of the literary discourse.

Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence of sentiments that could be seen as contributing to what Neil Easterbrook calls the “antipathy for sf” (510) does exist. Both Barr and Easterbrook mention Sven Birkerts and Michiko Kakutani, while David M. Larson, in his 1976 essay “Science Fiction, the Novel, and the Continuity of Condemnation”, names and quotes a plethora of science fiction detractors along the course of his text. However, Larson’s evidence, while being supported with citations, is too old to say anything about contemporary views on science fiction, and anecdotal evidence is not a particularly good basis for suggesting that the situation Larson describes is still in effect. A lot has happened between 1976 and 2014, and the reception of science fiction has changed accordingly.

My approach to answering the question of relevance – that is, the relevance of the criticism quoted by Larson – is to utilise John Rieder’s essay “On Defining SF, Or Not: Genre Theory, SF and History” as a way to establish that what has been said by the detractors of science fiction still has an effect on current perception of the genre, and thus perpetuates outdated ideas of what science fiction is and is not in a manner that does not do the literary discourse any justice. In his essay, Rieder sets out to apply modern historical genre theory, based on the shift to a new approach heralded by film scholar Rick Altman and announced by Ralph Cohen, to science fiction, and proposes a five-point list of assertions about science fiction:

- 1) sf is historical and mutable;
- 2) sf has no historical essence, no single unifying characteristic, and no point of origin;
- 3) sf is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and of drawing relationships among them;
- 4) sf’s identity is a differentially articulated position in an historical and mutable field of genres;
- 5) attribution of the identity of sf to a text constitutes an active intervention in its distribution and reception. (193)

Rieder’s fifth point has some wide-reaching implications if discrimination against science fiction is still a problem. Provided that both the discrimination and Rieder’s assertions are true, it follows that the science fiction detractors have intervened in the meaning of the science fiction label. In doing so, the science fiction label becomes more than just classification; it becomes a literary scarlet letter, indicating that the offending text has been found guilty of being science fiction, and the punishment varies from snide derision to instant indiscriminate dismissal, and in some cases even a form of *damnatio memoriae*² sentencing the science fiction text to a life of relative obscurity. The assumption I am making on the fifth point is that we are not just intervening in the text’s distribution and reception by labeling it, we are also intervening in the meaning of the label. By speaking in broad terms about a genre and the

2 Lat.: “damnation of memory”, the punishment of effectively being stricken from history, as practiced in ancient Rome.

works it applies to, the genre's connotations are subject to change like the reception of a text changes with the attribution of a genre to its identity. Similarly, the identity of a genre can be subject to change through the texts that are associated with it.

The central argument of this thesis concerns itself with proving that science fiction, by virtue of Rieder's propositions and the historical approach to genre theory, spans a far wider scope than the genre's detractors have a propensity for assuming, and to argue through this that the genre deserves recognition for what it does, and that what it does is unique in the field of literature. While Rieder's second proposition states that there is no single unifying characteristic of science fiction, I will examine a characteristic which can be said to be unique to the field of speculative fiction; the ability to take what is essentially a thought experiment, and using this as the basis to establish a diegesis in which the consequences and ramifications of this hypothesis that cannot be adequately demonstrated or explored in a purely theoretical context. For example, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is centered around the idea of Britain as controlled by a despotic political party as a totalitarian surveillance state, expands the idea to cover enough areas to make the premise believable, and then builds a narrative to demonstrate what this premise entails from an internal perspective.

This thesis as a whole is going to assume that Rieder's propositions are acceptable tenets, as they provide a comprehensive definition of the things we can say about the genre while taking into account Altman's approach to genre theory, building on Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature* and the Wittgensteinian theories of familial connections and anti-essentialism behind it, and finally because Rieder's fifth point is crucial to understanding exactly how mutable the field of genre theory is in the post-Fowler context. The flexibility of the genre spectrum, provided that Rieder's fifth point is true, makes the stance that any work belonging to one particular description are in any sense secondary to, or less reputable than, other kinds of literature fundamentally flawed, as it not only proceeds on the faith that there *is* a single unifying characteristic of science fiction, but that this unifying characteristic somehow renders science fiction a lesser kind of literature. I will assume that it would be uncontroversial to postulate that genre theory is not a tool with which one can render any kind of broad qualitative judgment on an entire genre, and thus render any attempt to write off science fiction – or indeed any genre or kind of literature subject to similar prejudices – moot, provided that the dismissal attempted is intended to be anything more than personal opinion. Particularly in academia, qualitative judgment should remain within the realm of the subjective.

What are we left with, then, when we want to talk about science fiction? Paul Kincaid is quoted by Rieder as saying that:

[...] science fiction is not one thing. Rather, it is any number of things – a future setting, a marvelous device, an ideal society, an alien creature, a twist in time, an interstellar journey, a satirical perspective, a particular approach to the matter of the story, whatever we are looking for when we look for science fiction, here more overt, here more subtle – which are braided together in an endless variety of combinations. (Rieder 192)

In other words, rather than a single unifying feature, science fiction is a myriad of features associated with the term “science fiction” placed in any combination. The problem comes in when trying to categorise these features, which resist the formalist attempts such as that by Attebery with his notion of “fuzzy sets” to categorise them. According to Rieder, categorising the features of a genre in such a manner would be futile “because the quasi-mathematical model of the fuzzy set can never be adequate itself to the open-ended process of history where genre formation and re-formation is constantly taking place” (195), which brings to mind a scenario not entirely dissimilar to Russell’s paradox – whether a set containing all sets not containing itself contains itself, and the resulting headaches from trying to figure out if the set of all sets not containing itself should contain itself when doing so prohibits it from being listed – ruling out the concept of fuzzy sets in favour of Wittgenstein’s linguistic approach, as Rieder argues that the fuzzy set concept is not a passive categorisation process, but “an active intervention in their [i.e. the elements being categorised] disposition” (195).

This is where Rieder’s fifth proposition comes into play once more: when labeling a text as part of a genre, the person who labels the text intervenes in the distribution and reception of the text. As it stands, the consequence of Rieder’s entire project – provided that his propositions are correct, which we will assume for the sake of the argument – is that whenever anyone says anything about a text and what genre or form it belongs to, it becomes part of the reception of the text. This approach to genre has the potential to democratise the power of definition, because it allows for different and seemingly contradicting postulations on a text to be correct simultaneously, as long as the postulations are accompanied by the caveat stating that the reading of the text is subjective, and conclusions drawn from said reading must necessarily be subjective also. However, if that is granted, then the postulations nevertheless become part of the debate by default. In short, defining a work as part of a genre is both part of the definition of the work, as well as part of the definition of the genre.

The practical function of a genre is to place a literary work into a category, which is mostly done for the benefit of the readers, who can use the categories to find a desirable text without searching the entire literary spectrum of works. In turn, the problem with the way genres are used today is an unfortunate and entirely unintentional consequence of the application of subjective opinions to reviews, as well as a few other fallacies; in the case of sf, the idea that the genre has not evolved in terms of literary quality since the days of Hugo Gernsback is one such fallacy, while the propensity for critics to dismiss the genre wholesale

based on a selection of authors the critics find in some way unsatisfactory is a more general fallacy that has been used for other genres. Neither is acceptable in a modern context; the influence of Gernsback is almost non-existent today with the pulp years of science fiction having been relegated to the history books, and an incomplete set of authors whose works belong to a certain genre cannot and should not represent the genre as a whole.

The Meaning of SF, and the Three Primary Texts

Science fiction is still left with a major problem, however – the implications of the genre label. As it stands, despite several science fiction novels getting high praise from literary critics and the influx of critically acclaimed and financially successful science fiction films and television shows for all practical purposes making science fiction a mainstream genre in these media, there is still a sense in the literary environment that the science fiction label is replete with historical baggage. One possible root of this historical baggage is the “pulp years” of the genre, which has had little in the way of historical vindication as the years have passed. David Larson has a different approach, instead seeing parallels to earlier criticism of the novel and poetry.

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that Larson’s essay is approaching 40 years of age as I am writing this, but what he has documented is several critics who have derided science fiction for one reason or another, and compared it to the criticism received by novels in the eighteenth century. Thus, the historical argument for the stigma attached to the science fiction label is well-documented, and if anything, people like Sven Birkerts prove that similar attitudes still linger in the literary milieu, despite the fact that these attitudes may not be as pervasive as they once were. These attitudes, based on stereotypes of what constitutes science fiction, lead Birkerts to making a statement like “science fiction will never be Literature with a capital ‘L’”, they lead Atwood to find a way to deny that what she writes is science fiction, and they lead the literary discourse into believing that themes thoroughly explored by the science fiction authors who are not ashamed of the label are entirely new and groundbreaking when they are explored by authors who would be ashamed of being labeled as part of the science fiction genre.

I would even go so far as to contend that this last point, about the problem of themes that have made the rounds in the science fiction discourse suddenly being seen as groundbreaking in the general literature discourse once someone without the science fiction label starts writing about them, is problematic enough to warrant an examination of the stigma commonly attached to the science fiction label.

In Larson's essay, the roles were practically reversed:

[...] scientists blame science fiction for spreading false views of science and for reviving outdated religious and ethical prejudices. The biologist H.J. Muller feels that instead of supporting human progress by singing the praises of inspiring new scientific developments such as genetic engineering, science fiction has been "gawking after the spirits of former times." It has actually supported exploded dualistic views of human nature and renewed false myths by refurbishing them in modern dress. (69)

Since then, there have been charges from science fiction authors that the authors attempting to escape the science fiction label are essentially taking credit for introducing themes that has not only been examined before, but also been examined to the point where the version the non-science fiction authors have used in their text has been discredited in one form or another, for example through oversaturation when there have been too many books with the same theme that have not done anything new with the theme, or through the theme having been so thoroughly deconstructed in other works that it has become completely discredited within the science fiction milieu. The accusation has been leveled against Margaret Atwood by both Peter Watts and Terry Pratchett in the wake of Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake*. In particular, Atwood's use of the term 'speculative fiction' has been contentious in the sf milieu, as instead of seeing it as a supergenre encompassing science fiction, fantasy, alternate history and everything in between to contain the frequent overlap between the three genres, Atwood formulates a different interpretation, where speculative fiction is best explained as being about things that can happen, where the technology is more or less already there, and which "takes place on Planet Earth" (513).

Atwood's definition of 'speculative fiction' complicates the picture unnecessarily. While she acknowledges the supergenre definition without dismissing it entirely, she persists in relying on her own definition of the term, as if the question of genre definition was not complicated enough already. The problem, put simply, is that the supergenre definition fulfills a much more practical function than the Atwoodian definition, which essentially divides science fiction between those who aim for the least outlandish variations of the genre and those who do not. Less charitably, the Atwoodian definition could be seen as a shirking of responsibilities – if science fiction is really considered a lesser genre of literature, then authors like Atwood, rather than wearing the science fiction genre tag as a badge of honour in an attempt to show that there are works of high quality within the science fiction genre, they abandon the genre in the same critical disfavour that ostensibly was the reason why they wished to distance themselves from the genre in the first place. By comparison, the supergenre definition of speculative fiction opens for a wider family of genres that interact with one another, bringing

works of high and low credibility³ together, and – hopefully – at some point doing away with the general stereotype of the genre. The supergenre definition allows the term ‘speculative fiction’ to encompass genres like science fiction, fantasy, and alternate history on one end, and the more respected genres like magical realism on the other, which in turn allows these genres to interact with one another in a more meaningful way.

The novels I have used to represent the sf supergenre are all thought of primarily as science fiction works, but they are selected to prove that even within science fiction, the spectrum is wide. First, we have George Orwell’s classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is often given a pass even by the detractors of sf on account of its massive impact on the popular consciousness, but as a consequence has been exempted from the science fiction label. I will analyse both its popular and cultural impact, its potential for prophecy and argue that science fiction should lay claim to the novel to assert the genre’s potential for producing canonical works, and demonstrate how it embraces the thought experiment Orwell proposes, which is focused on a future Britain – called ‘Airstrip One’ – as a surveillance state ruled by a totalitarian government. The latter point is particularly important when it comes to understanding that a large portion of the popular impact of the novel is due to the near-certainty that the future described can happen in some form or other.

After *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, I will analyse Neal Stephenson’s 1992 novel *Snow Crash*, which I have chosen to represent a particular subgenre of science fiction at the precipice of becoming something else: cyberpunk at a turning point before it became post-cyberpunk. I am going to classify *Snow Crash* as a seminal post-cyberpunk novel, and examine how and why this novel is a turning point in the generic development of cyberpunk, as well as an analysis of what generic movements like cyberpunk within the sf spectrum means for sf. Also, similar to what I will do for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, I will examine the elements of *Snow Crash* that have proved to be prescient, and what this means for how the novel is read from a modern perspective. There will also be an analysis of the novel’s propensity for ‘cool stuff’ – with which I mean elements like Hiro’s use of katanas, Raven’s glass knives and nuclear bomb motorcycle sidecar, the pizza delivery scene that opens the novel, the cyborg dog (or “Rat-Thing”) that moves at the speed of sound – and why that kind of visceral entertainment would be frowned upon by literary scholars, as well as an attempt to explain the novel’s placement in time, which will show the link between science fiction and the alternate history genre.

Finally, there will be a section on Frank Herbert’s magnum opus *Dune*, which will be analysed to demonstrate the generic fluidity between science fiction and fantasy. I will also examine Herbert’s use of feudalism and his conspicuously exclusive focus on the ruling class

3 Credibility in a subjective sense, that is.

in the novel, as well as the novel's use of religion and mythology as part of its deconstruction of the monomyth, or the 'Hero's Journey'. *Dune* is chosen both for its distinct difference from both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Snow Crash* and because within the science fiction community, it is generally accepted as the genre's equivalent of *Lord of the Rings* both because of its close ties to fantasy literature and because of its status as a highly influential novel in its genre. There will also be an examination of the implications of *Dune*'s conspicuous absence from academic reading lists that far more readily include *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, and where *Dune* could potentially be placed in an academic context.

Before the in-depth analyses of these primary texts, however, I am going to present a brief overview over the situation, examining the reception of sf, particularly the elements that would have contributed to the stigma – or the ghetto, if you will⁴ – associated with science fiction. From there, I intend to argue, using sf as a specific example, that any position that bases itself on excluding a genre wholesale from the general literary discourse is unsound, and by contrast what makes sf a genre that is worthy of academic scrutiny. The conclusion sums up the arguments derived from what I have written about these primary texts, and apply them to demonstrate that sf is a genre that should not be treated as second-class literature, on account of the fact that sf can contribute unique ideas to the general literary discourse.

4 While I acknowledge that using the term 'ghetto' can be too strong, I have to, on occasion, use the term to engage some of my sources using their own language.

1. Part I: Genre Theory and SF

On the Origin of the Ghetto

While one must always exercise caution when it comes to declaring watershed moments in any sort of academic field, let alone genre history, consensus seems to have established that the view of science fiction as a fundamentally lowbrow genre of literature can at least in part be blamed on the originator of the name “science fiction”, author Hugo Gernsback. The argument stems from the understanding that *Amazing Stories*, the pulp magazine founded by Gernsback in 1926, cemented the public image of science fiction as juvenile escapist fantasy. It could be said that this development would have occurred with or without Gernsback, but this kind of conjecture is ultimately meaningless, at least for our purposes. Regardless, we need to acknowledge that while it may be contested by some, Gernsback’s complicity in the perception of science fiction as literature of poor quality is widely held as a fact, an unintended consequence of wanting to bring science fiction to the masses, which he did by utilising the pulp magazine format. It should be noted that Gernsback was no idealist, however, and most of his efforts appear to have been made in the pursuit of money.

However, David Larson offers a very different explanation for the state of science fiction criticism, unconcerned with Gernsback and *Amazing Stories*. In ‘Science Fiction, the Novel and the Continuity of Condemnation’, Larson outlines the prominent criticism of the kinds of literature that achieve mass popularity, which can be traced back at least as far as 1579, with Stephen Gosson’s vitriolic condemnation of poetry, and continued with the dismissal of the novel as a vehicle for moral degradation throughout the eighteenth century, a criticism espoused by Timothy Dwight and no less a figure than Thomas Jefferson. This criticism, Larson argues, counts science fiction as the last in a line of literary kinds that conservative academic forces could mark as a scapegoat for some form of moral panic. While the evidence cannot trace a direct line apart from a semblance in argumental style among those who have condemned popular literary forms over the years, the comparative analysis of the critical rhetoric quoted in the essay grants considerable salience to Larson’s theory.

I would argue that both of these aspects – the continuity of condemnation and Gernsback’s creation of the hitherto resilient link between pulp fiction and sf – are, like so many causes of so many effects, parts of a bigger picture. Larson’s argument is compelling and well-documented, and the association of sf with pulp magazine culture is certainly convenient for the detractors of sf. Placed into the context outlined by Larson, a pattern emerges; new forms of literature arrives, the old guard challenge them, attempt to discredit and bury them as detrimental bastardised quasi-literature, before the challenge to the status

quo posed by the new forms eventually get assimilated into academia as the old guard dies out. This suggests that the derision of sf could arise from a fear of the unknown, and this brings us to Ursula LeGuin and her essay 'Why are Americans Afraid of Dragons?'

LeGuin, while focusing on fantasy literature in this essay, is nevertheless talking about a genre that has the same problem as science fiction, and she talks about "a moral disapproval of fantasy, a disapproval so intense, and often so aggressive, that I cannot help but see it as arising, fundamentally, from fear" (39). If anything, Larson's article proves that what LeGuin says about fantasy literature is true about science fiction as well. The most common accusation against sf, according to Larson, is that of escapism:

Eighteenth-century critics insist that, as escape fiction, the novel is dangerous because it debilitates the mind and presents false portraits of man and society. In other words, it replaces reality with a never, never land of wish fulfillment and thus unfits its readers for coping with ordinary, humdrum existence. Twentieth-century writers heartily agree – provided that science fiction is substituted for the novel. (69-70, italics mine)

Throughout his essay, Larson builds a strong case for his assertion that science fiction has been maligned in a manner that resembles earlier criticism of other kinds of literature. This consistent rhetoric towards contemporary popular literature is what Larson calls the continuity of condemnation. Concurrently, the use of the word "dangerous", which is similarly supported in Larson's analysis by the same quotes, suggests that the condemnation, as Le Guin says of the hostility against fantasy literature, arises from fear. This begs the question: Fear of what, exactly? What reasons could well-established thinkers and authors possibly have to fear science fiction? In what manner could anyone call a genre like science fiction *dangerous*? One possible answer to this question is that the critics are afraid that they will be made irrelevant. As Marleen Barr points out:

Once upon a time, cultural studies, film theory, television criticism, feminist theory, creative writing, queer theory, and all ethnic literature were seen as beyond the pale. While the once despised areas I list have been granted belated respectability, science fiction still suffers from the slings and arrows of outrageous textism. Nothing stays the same, however. (435)

In essence, then, this fear that gives rise to the anti-sf sentiment could be the fear that sf will one day be accepted, forcing them either to educate themselves on the subject or join their predecessors – people like Stephen Gosson and Timothy Dwight, who condemned poetry and novels, respectively – in the history books. And, like Barr says, nothing stays the same. Yet she claims that at the same time, there is next to no desire to accept sf among academics. Furthermore, she notes that employing sf specialists is no priority for any English department, according to the MLA Job Information List. And for the *PMLA* science fiction special topic, the *PMLA* editorial board "rejected the vast majority of the articles it considered for [the] issue" (434), leaving Barr and her co-editor Carl Freedman

with an overly thin and, in their eyes, insufficient collection of articles on sf. But on the other hand, one can argue that writing off the decisions of the PMLA editorial board based on a single anecdote might be somewhat reckless. There is no guarantee that the rejected articles were victims of bias, but while it was convenient for Barr's argument that these articles were rejected, I cannot claim any knowledge of what arguments the PMLA editorial board used to justify their rejection of these articles. Barr's view of the situation as a conspiracy may seem far-fetched, but her view of the situation is also the only view presented, and any conjecture attempting to assume any truth about the situation without adding other points of view would still remain conjecture.

The vulnerability of sf today, as a genre that has been denied entry into the literary mainstream for so long and yet is constantly finding new and exciting territory to work with – after all, sf is one of very few genres that not only allows a level of speculation about possible futures and human potential beyond any other genre, but makes this speculation its *raison d'être* – makes the wholesale dismissal of science fiction as juvenile escapism less and less tenable as time goes by and the world starts looking more and more like a Philip K. Dick novel. Curiously enough, in an interview from 1976 published in *The Missouri Review*, Dick himself details a view of the ghetto as the place where sf retained its identity. The argument is based on the identity crisis that the genre is said to have suffered for breaking out into the mainstream (Aldiss 164). However, his argument primarily concerns publishing and marketing identity rather than textual identity, which I would contend is not the whole problem. It is a significant part of it, but what Dick describes – books that are science fiction when published in one format and not in another – is not a consequence of sf emerging from the ghetto, but a backhanded way of trying to compliment sf works, and tacitly approving the continuation of the the segregation of the sf ghetto and the mainstream. The textual identity of sf is intact, but the marketing is schizophrenic, which is not a good thing. But at the same time, it is only part of the problem, and I would argue that rather than being a consequence of sf emerging from the ghetto, it is keeping the genre entrenched in the ghetto by claiming that it only has to shed the sf label to become mainstream, which is detrimental to the genre and the mainstream, as it implies that 'mainstream' is an entity disparate from genre fiction, which I would contend that it is not.

Regardless of whether the ghetto is good for sf or not, provided the ghetto is still enforced in any way, it is done in silence; the enforcers claim the ghetto is abolished, and pretends to throw the sf community a bone, but in fact, there is no desire to explore the rich and diversified landscapes and galaxies of the sf genre, and there is no real action taken to tear down the class barriers between sf and the literary mainstream, despite good words and

the occasional fifteen minutes in the spotlight. This kind of behaviour could be said to be a form of systematic textism – which is not the outspoken dogmatic derision Larson refers to, but slowly suffocating the chance for sf to prove itself by ignoring the progress made since the genre was placed in the ghetto. But the origin question – the origin of the ghetto, that is – has a far more complex answer.

While Larson's theory of the continuity of condemnation is rooted in the next best thing to clear evidence – that is, a correlation too conspicuous to ignore – it does not provide an answer to the all-important question implicit in this inquiry: Why? A potential answer has briefly been touched upon earlier in this thesis: the 'pulp years' of science fiction. However, the pulp years could have caused the separation from the mainstream in a very different way, as Ben Bova explains in his 1970 essay 'The Many Worlds of Science Fiction':

[Amazing Stories] established science fiction as a definite genre in the literary field, with its own special writers and readers. In other words, it put science fiction into a ghetto. This was hardly Gernsback's intent. And arguments still rage among the faithful as to whether the science fiction ghetto was self-imposed or inflicted by an uncaring outside world. Regardless of intent or cause, though, science fiction as Gernsback and his followers (and imitators) practiced it quickly became a specialty literature. (801)

As the genre was kept segregated from the literary mainstream, science fiction went in a different direction. The initial results were problematic; most stories were two-dimensional adventure-romance plots transplanted from westerns and detective fiction into a futuristic setting, while other stories were little more than poorly disguised filibusterous tracts from the author on how to construct a futuristic utopia. Furthermore, a significant amount of the scientific aspects of these stories were poorly researched and made little to no sense to those familiar with the scientific fields in question, thus depriving the genre of a potential fanbase that could have given it some credibility at an early stage. On top of all this, publishing techniques relied on juvenile marketing strategies that stripped the genre of any semblance of literary credibility from the outset, and squandered what remained of appeal to an adult audience. (801-2)

Like Bova said in the quote above, it is highly unlikely that Gernsback's intention could have been to place science fiction in a ghetto. Nevertheless, intentions cannot circumvent the turn of events that resulted, and the decision to publish science fiction stories in a pulp magazine could easily, as Bova suggests, have been the deciding factor that allowed the genre to be placed in its own ghetto. By all appearances, it allowed the development of a culture of poorly written science fiction built on utopian filibusters, hackneyed plots and settings lacking in substance that made the genre unpalatable for both the literature mainstream and those steeped in scientific lore – the target audience that

never was. This made science fiction an easy target for the continuity of condemnation once the New Wave authors like Michael Moorcock, J.G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick and Harlan Ellison entered the picture around the the 1950s and '60s. With their new approach, which added high-minded literary sensibilities to futuristic speculation which, while often highly hypothetical as far as scientific content was concerned, turned instead to ideological speculation and reformed the ailing genre into something genuinely thought-provoking and incredibly exciting from a literary point of view.

The New Wave of science fiction took the lessons from *Brave New World*, 1984, William Burroughs and Ray Bradbury to heart, and as such challenged the literary mainstream to take note. They did, and responded in kind with the same response the novel had gotten some two hundred years before, and poetry almost two hundred years before that again; accusations of escapism, accusations of unsound moral character, and castigation for challenging their hegemony. The inherent hypocrisy is worth noting – the tastemakers that ruled the literary mainstream and academia (and those who still do) achieved their status after the ideas they espoused had faced the same castigation that they would later impose on the sf authors who grew tired of the boundaries of the ghetto. If a professor of literature specialised in for example multicultural American literature or queer theory can go on to argue that sf somehow is a less worthy area of study, it would merit severe accusations of hypocrisy. Certainly, not all sf is good, but then again, there is nothing to suggest that the same ratio of good and bad does not exist in other literary genres. To quote Theodore Sturgeon: “Ninety percent of science fiction is crud. But then ninety percent of everything is crud, and it’s the ten percent that isn’t crud that is important”⁵. However, the genre has been around long enough to produce a remaining ten percent large enough that it should be taken seriously as a genre by now.

By all appearances, then, the science fiction ghetto seems to have risen by incident, an unintended side effect of the first serious attempt to consolidate the genre, which was Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories*. When the genre eventually decided to try its hand at becoming proper literature, the stigma of the pulp magazine days of science fiction had closed a lot of doors. After the arrival of New Wave science fiction, critics resorted to the continuity of condemnation, in part due to the original sin of the pulp years, but also due to a fear of the possibility that the new literature could bring forth a paradigm shift. Presumably, these critics fear literature that challenges their dogma with new ideas and theories that could render their knowledge obsolete, which in turn means that sf, with its ever-increasing popularity and correspondingly increasing relevance to the world, becomes

5 Commonly referred to informally as “Sturgeon’s Law”. Source: <<http://www.physics.emory.edu/~weeks/misc/slawn.html>>

a target for these critics. This is the hypothesis, at least, but the burden of proof ultimately lies with the critics who, whether by design or not, perpetuate the stereotypes surrounding sf.

Talking Squid in Outer Space (and Other Outdated Arguments)

Margaret Atwood is an infamous character in the sf literary field for her perceived derisive comments against the genre and her persistent insistence that she herself does not belong there. She argues that she belongs in the genre of *speculative* fiction, a genre that Peter Watts implies that Atwood made up to exclude herself from the otherwise disreputable science fiction spectrum: “*speculative* fiction, she calls it, the difference being that it is based on rigorously-researched science, extrapolating real technological and social trends into the future” (2). This definition of speculative fiction was even corroborated by Atwood herself, in an article which was, curiously enough, printed in the special topic of *PMLA* that Barr co-edited with Carl Freedman. Here, Atwood explains her distinction like this:

...I liked to make a distinction between science fiction proper – for me, this label denotes books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can’t go – and speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth. (513)

However, both Barr and Watts have recited less palatable comparisons between the Atwoodian speculative fiction and science fiction from the author. Watts cites the somewhat curious distinction “chemicals and rockets” (2), while Barr cited the similarly absurd “giant squid” analogy (430), formulated elsewhere as “talking squid in outer space”, a statement which has since become memetic in the sf community.

It should be noted, though, that neither Barr nor Watts are entirely willing to paint Atwood as a villain – at most, she is simply ignorant or misguided. Atwood claims in her own essay that she only makes the distinction between science fiction and what she writes because she does not want to promise something she cannot provide (513). But then, even if the intent is not malicious, it is still problematic, and perhaps even moreso than if her distinction actually came from enmity against science fiction. To elaborate: Atwood’s actions and the intentions behind them are a problem because they are representative of an unfortunate development – if Atwood represents the general view of sf correctly, it means that science fiction is seen as a genre unconcerned with life as it is on Earth; a view that appears to ignore several major developments within sf over the years. Using fictional alien cultures can, is, and has been used as metaphors to highlight the good and/or bad

sides of the human condition through constructing cultures with selected human elements exaggerated, subverted, inverted or absent.

The ignorance displayed by the detractors of sf does not do them justice, as most of these critics will inevitably be seen by the sf community to believe themselves, in their arrogance, to be so far above the system that the literary field bends and contorts itself according to their whims. To some extent, Atwood can be said to do this, as she acknowledges that there is another, more widely acknowledged use of the term 'speculative fiction' (513), but still chooses to classify her works as part of this genre with that name which, as opposed to how the majority of people use the term these days, she takes to mean what she says it means, which is another problem as it distorts the understanding of the term 'speculative fiction' at a time when the umbrella version of the term could become more useful as it allows the genres operating in the border areas between specific subgenres of science fiction and fantasy. Watts, an sf author himself, takes strong exception to the descriptions Atwood has made of science fiction:

Whenever Atwood makes such remarks [as she did regarding her works *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* not being science fiction according to herself] I suffer mixed reactions. Sheer dumbfounded awe, for one – that this bloody tourist could blow into town and presume to lecture the world on the geography of the ghetto, blithely contradicting generations of real geographers who've spent their whole lives there. It stirs something violent in me. And yet, above the gut I just can't believe that Atwood could possibly be that stupid. She can tell Wyndham from Gibson, she reads them both. She's certainly not an idiot. She may not even be a liar. (2)

It needs to be said that Watts' vitriolic response to Atwood's remarks is leading up to an argument that "science fiction has become more relevant than 'Literature'" (3), something he accuses Atwood of being in denial about. Yet, as previously stated, Atwood is no antagonist here. What she is, on the other hand, is ill-informed about developments within the sf milieu. As Watts points out, she knows that the science fiction spectrum is vast, and even larger when attached to the sf supergenre with fantasy, alternate history and everything in between these genres. But when she says she is against false advertising, and explains how and why, she presents herself as understanding science fiction only as according to a largely outdated, narrow and crude stereotype, which is more in line with her more off-the-cuff remarks, remarks like those cited by Watts and Barr.

So while Atwood has tried to deny any enmity on her part, her attitudes to and understanding of science fiction is still a symptom of a much bigger problem. The problem in question is that the enforcement of the ghetto has led to the perpetuation of misconceptions of what sf is like, which appears to be because the authors of sf have not

been able to challenge these misconceptions. A possible root of that problem is the walls of the ghetto, which are described by Andrew Milner as a membrane:

...that is, a selective barrier, impermeable to many but by no means all elements – located in the overlap between the sf restricted field and institutionalized bourgeois sf. From the canonical side, this impermeability tends to allow sf to enter the canon, but not to return to sf; from the sf side, movement is normally permitted in both directions. (409)

In other words, the ghetto walls can be climbed on the sf side, but once out, forces on the side of the ‘canonical’ side denies re-entry into the sf side. Or to be precise, the problem is the literary canon – the mainstream, if you will. And the specific problem is the classic summation commonly attributed to Kingsley Amis: If it is good it cannot be science fiction, and if it is science fiction it cannot be good (Barr 431). This tautological fallacy nevertheless still appears to be inherent in the mindset of detractors of sf. It suggests an unwillingness to update their worldview, and acknowledging that certain works could be prototypes for new genres or for movements within genres after the fact. For instance, saying that *1984* is a New Wave science fiction novel that predates the actual New Wave by a few years is not necessarily problematic. In fact, retroactively including works in various genres is a necessity in certain cases in order to understand where the genre comes from.

Prototypical science fiction literature – that is, prototypical in the sense that they were published before 1926⁶ – still appears to hold a certain amount of respect in literary circuits. And yet certain literary critics are willing to contort the genre spectrum in unhealthy ways just to be able to deny that works like *Frankenstein*, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* or *The Time Machine* belong to the sf genre, a denial that appears to be as patently absurd as proclaiming that Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* is not a part of the canon of detective fiction because it was written before the first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*. The distinction is both dogmatic and arbitrary, and should not be a part of modern genre theory. In fact, talking about an origin point for a genre runs completely contrary to Rieder’s approach, as his historical anti-essentialist view of the field dismisses the idea that genres can have points of origin, which Rieder further supports with Hans-Robert Jauss’ repetition-based reception theory, which argues that “there cannot be a first example of a genre, because the generic character of a text is precisely what is repeated and conventional in it.” (Rieder 196)

6 1926 is often used as a ‘year zero’ for science fiction because it is the year that *Amazing Stories* was first published, and therefore is a commonly cited point of genesis for the genre.

Genre Theory is Not Hard Science

One of the problems about the wholesale dismissal of science fiction (and the sf supergenre by extension) is that the theory depends on the unification of an entire field of study – genre theory – to create a rigorous dogma that makes genre assignment definite and immutable. As of yet, such a theory does not exist, and this is because genres are not categories as much as a spectrum of degrees⁷. No work is quite so dyed-in-the-wool part of a genre that not a trace of other genres can be found, and I am not yet willing to admit that there is such a thing as a perfect archetypal work of a genre – that is, a literary work that so fully embodies every aspect of a specific genre that it contains every element and trope of the genre without having to incorporating elements from other genres. If such a work exists, the narrative will in all likelihood suffer for the resulting contortion of genre conventions.

Likewise, no credible genre theory exists that proves beyond reasonable doubt that genres are thoroughly solid ahistorical concepts. In fact, one of the most recent paradigm shifts in genre theory was Rick Altman's 1984 article 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre', which was one of the first articles on the subject that explicitly did not treat genres as ahistorical entities. In fact, according to Rieder, the definition of a genre is not by any means a static formal description, but is a continuing narrative that includes historical considerations and the myriad of differing opinions on what sf is. Further, Rieder claims that genre theory has failed to take certain fields of reception into account:

Most genre theory has focused on the choices writers make when composing texts or the readers make, or ought to make, in interpreting them. But the practice of generic attribution also clusters heavily in two institutional locations, commercial publishing and the academy, and this pair of institutions bears no accidental resemblance to the oppositions between high and low culture... (204)

Further, the non-inclusion of publishing and commercial histories in the construction of the history of sf will leave interpretations of this historical progression that will inevitably be missing a significant piece of the proverbial puzzle. Such a historical examination would ignore the consequences of Gernsback's decision to create *Amazing Stories* as a pulp magazine, as well as the impact of the massive commercial success of the *Star Wars* franchise. The decisions made at publishing level affect the reception of the book among the public as well as – despite any insistence to the contrary – the literary critics, who in turn possess a certain influence over public perception of literary works. The power of having the right publishing house behind your book should not be underestimated, as explained by Peter Watts:

7 Of course, such a claim is a gross oversimplification of the situation; a completely accurate graphical representation of the genre spectrum would have to incorporate a form of non-Euclidian geometry.

The same critics who roll their eyes at aliens and warp drive don't seem to have any problems with a woman ascending into heaven while hanging laundry in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, just so long as Gabriel Garcia Marquez doesn't get published by Tor or Del Rey [sic]. (1)

Watts' barbed insinuation may appear to be excessively cynical and simplistic, but the viewpoint he espouses has not formed in a vacuum, because he shares this view with Philip K. Dick. A simplified version of Dick's analysis it may be, but the fact of the matter is that Watts has a valid point; if Tor Books or Del Rey had published an author like Haruki Murakami, he would not be enjoying the broad mainstream appeal he does today. Nor would Gabriel Garcia Marquez, for that matter. However, the main point is to prove that publishers – for better or worse – can, will, and do influence the public perception of a novel, either directly or through the bias of literary critics and other members of the public, largely because a substantial group of people, whether critics or members of the general public, have a propensity to judge books by their covers.

There is, however, an even greater paradox related to the problem of genre theory and the reception of sf, and it can be summarised like this: While the wholesale dismissal of sf requires a dogmatic and rigid genre theory to maintain validity, protecting the works in the borderlands between literary fiction and sf that manage to conform to the literary standards of the sf detractors requires a flexible genre spectrum that allows the detractors to spare these works the indignity of being lumped in with the 'unworthy' sf corpus. The absurdity of this paradox emphasises the indefensibility of the textist stance adopted by sf detractors, as one could argue that several works whose status in the literary canon are firmly ingrained and set in stone would still have a connection to sf, whether as a contributor by influence or by retroactive inclusion into the sf spectrum, including works such as – but by no means limited to – *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and *20 000 Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne, the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series and other books within the same diegesis, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, and if you stretch the definition of sf far enough, Goethe's *Faust* and Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*.

Similar to the theory of retroactive genre inclusion and the *Murders in the Rue Morgue* example, the works of Isaac Asimov embodies a significant problem for another argument commonly cited by the detractors of science fiction: author-genre attachment, the process of defining an author from the genre they write in. This crude, yet effective tactic can downplay an author severely; a display of famous alumni at King's College London lists people like Thomas Hardy, Susan Hill and Hanif Kureishi as "writer" or "novelist", while Arthur C. Clarke is listed as a "sci-fi writer", the sole author who has the genre made an

explicit part of the profession he ostensibly shares with the other luminaries. The problem with this theory is authors like Isaac Asimov. While he is arguably most famous for his science fiction work, Asimov was an incredibly prolific author and has books in nine out of the ten major categories in the Dewey decimal system. This means that besides producing a massive body of work, Asimov's writings were wide in scope, ranging from science fiction novels like the *Foundation* series and *I, Robot* to instruction books like *An Easy Introduction to the Slide Rule*. It is therefore unreasonable to link all works by Asimov to a single literary genre.

However, this does not mean that all authors, let alone authors who write or have written sf, have similarly wide bodies of work, nor should it be taken to imply that all authors have at some point left their comfort zones. It simply proves that a rigorous dogmatic view of sf is untenable, as it assumes that authors who have produced works within certain genres are locked in place, their entire career defined according to what might essentially be a small section of their corpus. While the Asimov example shows that it can be an impossible endeavour to categorise certain authors based on the genre they write in, we should also bear in mind that author-genre attachment can actually be a serious problem for some authors. When Salman Rushdie released his first novel, *Grimus*, he was nominated for a prestigious science fiction award – and slated to win, according to Brian Aldiss, who was a member of the judging panel along with Kingsley Amis – when Rushdie's publisher pulled the nomination at the last minute in order to avoid Rushdie being pigeonholed as a science fiction author⁸. The implication that being labeled as a science fiction author is somehow harmful to the author's potential for recognition is another symptom of textism that inhibits authors from writing what they want to, or what they need to, even.

To say that science fiction has an image problem is an understatement. In the eyes of some critics, if any genre can be attached to a novel, that can be a problem in and of itself, but if that genre happens to be science fiction, it drains the respectability from the novel like a pair of clown shoes and a spinning bow tie. Part of it may stem from the pulp origin of the genre, but the mentality is also perpetuated by risk-averse publishing companies, and they keep science fiction in its ghetto in two ways. One is the refusal to take on books that cannot escape being labeled as part of the science fiction genre, the other is by circumventing the risk by not naming the genre, instead opting for solutions that range from the somewhat paradoxical 'dystopian literature' – which could just as easily be defined as a subgenre of science fiction – to Margaret Atwood's curious use of the term 'speculative fiction'. In the end, this is almost worse than the risk aversion; instead of allowing science

8 Source: <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jun/16/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.artsandhumanities>>

fiction to attach modern literary work of great importance to its name and thus attain that much needed credibility, they separate works of exceptional quality from a genre that needs good works to rectify its image in favour of applying what is essentially a vanity label to the works, and once more perpetuating the divide between genre fiction and the mainstream.

Part II: Nineteen Eighty-Four

Establishing that science fiction suffers from an image problem is an easy task, but like so many other cultural struggles, the reasons for the problems faced by the genre are myriad, and not all of them cover regional differences. For instance, according to Le Guin, British readers appear to have less problems seeing age-specific fiction – that is, literature aimed at children, teenagers and young adults, of which a predominant amount can be said to be fantasy literature – as a genre of merit than US readers (54-5). This could be attributed to a rich tradition of fantasy writers on the British Isles, from Jonathan Swift through J.M. Barrie and J.R.R. Tolkien to J.K. Rowling. Similarly, the Soviet Union encouraged science fiction⁹, but they treated fantasy with such disdain that Russian translations of *The Lord of the Rings* were edited to make a science fiction angle more plausible. One of the great exceptions to the rule that Britons have a propensity for fostering a positive environment for fantasy literature while being more ambivalent towards science fiction is George Orwell's seminal novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is treated with a great degree of reverence and is a commonly used reference when seeking to condemn totalitarianism.

The importance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as both a novel and a cautionary tale against the dangers of a totalitarian government cannot be overstated, and in the next few chapters, I intend to talk about what *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does that makes it not just an important novel, but an important science fiction novel. Revisiting the dystopic Airstrip One has been an increasingly popular exercise among doomsayers of all stripes, and the relevance of the novel has outlasted not just the reign of Stalin, but it outlasted the year that gave the book its title, as well as the entire Soviet Union, seemingly without breaking stride. In the first section of this part, I intend to argue that not only does this book belong within the sf spectrum, but that it is an exemplar of science fiction, at least in the sense that it takes a hypothesis on what the future may hold and gives it a setting in which it can be examined in greater detail. The second section takes a look at the novel's effect on the popular consciousness, while the third section discusses the continued relevance of the book, with focus on the possibility for a similar situation to arise.

Nineteen Eighty-Four also circumvents Birkerts' assertions on science fiction by having the premise represented in its characters – the Party represented not just figuratively by Big Brother, but in a more literal sense by O'Brien, a double agent and devout member of the Thought Police who seeks to ferret out the resisting elements of the

⁹ Granted, Soviet science fiction had to pass through some stringent state censorship to ensure that it was compliant with the party line, but party-sanctioned science fiction was nevertheless still science fiction, and still encouraged.

populace – embodied by Winston and Julia – and break their oppositional fervour in the name of Big Brother. Whether the characters have the emotional depth and complexity that is required of a good character depends entirely on how deep one is willing to go when reading the novel, but it would do the novel little justice to not at least make a serious attempt to read between the lines.

The Future of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

One of the most common criteria for a story to be considered science fiction is that it contains pieces of technology that are in some form unattainable at the time of writing, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has a few, but their presence is used quite subtly and sparingly throughout. The main differences between the time when Orwell wrote the novel and the future envisioned in the story are largely social and political, apart from a few technological elements, most prominently the telescreen.

The voice came from an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror which formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall. Winston turned a switch and the voice sank somewhat, though the voice was still distinguishable. The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely. [...] The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinised. (Orwell 4-5)

However, as a piece of technology, the telescreen is only important in its capacity as a representation of the omnipresence of the Thought Police and, either vicariously or metaphorically, Big Brother, but this omnipresence is nevertheless so important to the story that it cannot be removed without being replaced with an equally insidious piece of surveillance technology. Similar fictional technology is mentioned in passing elsewhere: for instance, Party-sanctioned music is produced automatically using a device called a versificator, which produces deliberately bland music that does not inspire subversive emotions, but otherwise, technological advancements are kept to a bare minimum, ostensibly because technological research is primarily dedicated to warfare research. Other technology is hinted at, but never mentioned explicitly.

More than anything, this is a consequence of the setting: the Party is far too busy finding ways and measures to subjugate the people of Airstrip One to even consider technological innovation beyond their near single-minded goal to remain in power. This marks a distinct connection between *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the post-apocalyptic segment of the sf spectrum – the absence of futuristic technology as a narrative device. It is not unheard of to depict future societies with anti-technological sentiments in sf – one example of this is seen in the universe depicted in Frank Herbert's seminal space opera *Dune*¹⁰, where a massive war created something best described as a technological vacuum where advanced computers are virtually non-existent, allowing the setting to bridge the gap between science fiction and fantasy as mystical elements take over from high technology. Both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Dune* eschew extensive descriptions of future technology in favour of political thought experiments; however, *Dune* examines a distant future where feudalism has made its return to supplant the modern parliamentary democracies, while *Nineteen Eighty-Four* examines totalitarianism in a future not too far removed from the author's own post-World War II standpoint.

The crux of Orwell's vision of the future rests nevertheless on an element that makes it exceptionally interesting to explore from our current standpoint, and that is information. Orwell took the time-honoured aphorism 'Knowledge is power' to its logical extent in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and turned it into a prophecy: Information, and specifically the control of information, is an essential tool for any despot intent on subduing the populace and make them accept their masters. In fact, the Party is in many ways entirely dependent on the control of information to assert their rule over Airstrip One. Based on the way *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is written, the power over information possessed by the Party is implied to be so vast that there is nothing to suggest that everything known about the world outside of Airstrip One is not a massive lie constructed solely to keep the people of Airstrip One in line. Because of the perpetual war, there are no possible ways to travel or see for oneself if the geography of the world as taught by the Party or as detailed in Emmanuel Goldstein's infamous book, *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, is the true account of the outside world. However, as it turns out, *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* is itself a hoax – O'Brien implies that while Goldstein's treatise does exist in some form, the book Winston was given to read (and also happens to be the only account of the outside world given to the reader) is fiction, written by the Thought Police to act as a lure for potential dissidents like Winston and Julia.

10 *Dune* is the subject of Part IV, and will be examined in detail there.

This in turn could be taken to mean that the Thought Police-penned version of Goldstein's book is a lie within a lie, appearing to spread a version of events that appears to be a truth inconvenient to the Party, but is actually a smoke screen intended to camouflage the real lie: Oceania is not an empire spanning half the Earth, and the two opposing global empires are equally fictional. This theory is pure extracanonical speculation, of course, but it remains an interesting option to consider. For a start, it makes Orwell's premise more feasible. At the time when he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Britain was seeing the demise of its empire on the horizon, and a more general shift in geopolitical borders and distinctions after the Second World War, which left countries caught in the middle of such upheavals particularly vulnerable to takeovers by despotic entities¹¹. To maintain a hold on power as absolute as the Party does in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is imperative to make sure that the fiction necessary to keep the populace from revolting is maintained by any means necessary.

To that end, the Party has invented outer enemies to perpetuate a constant state of war, claimed that Airstrip One is part of an empire called Oceania that spans half the world, and used these fictions to maintain a constant state of fear in the people of Airstrip One. This fear is one of the main tools employed to keep the people from revolting, using the fear of hostile invasion to generate artificial patriotism in the people. In turn, the artificially generated patriotic fervour is used to avoid having the Party's fictions questioned. Another factor worth keeping in mind when considering this possibility is that Britain – or Airstrip One – is, after all, an island nation, which makes it especially easy to cut it off from other countries. By declaring the shorelines off-limits for civilians and declaring the skies above a no-fly zone, there is no way for the general population to see what the outside world looks like, and thus the Party can sustain a fictional perpetual war with ease. An apocryphal reference to Great Britain being seen as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” by the Americans during the Second World War¹² is the most likely source of inspiration for the name Airstrip One. In the novel, the removal of the name of Great Britain – and by extension the national identity of its population – is in itself a part of the massive apparatus keeping the Party in power, because the anonymous title makes Airstrip One a place rather than a country with its own identity, a privilege that is, in a way, passed on to the continent of Oceania. If Oceania and the perpetual war is Party-created fiction, it is an exemplary representation of the power of the Party, as it means that the war-induced patriotism is ultimately directed towards the Party alone, without

11 One example of this happening in real life is the ascension to power made by Kim Il-sung and maintained by his dynasty in North Korea. Coincidentally, Kim Il-sung became leader of North Korea in 1948, when Orwell began writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

12 The phrase has been confirmed to have been in use by the time of the Cold War, but there have been claims that the expression had been in use since the Second World War.

any abstract idea of a nation or country to stand above the government. In essence, this would mean that the Party not only rules the nation, it *is* the nation, at least as far as the concept of patriotism is concerned.

Each of the four Ministries of the Party represents a way of subjugating the population of Airstrip One in one way or another. The Ministry of Plenty (*Miniplenty* in Newspeak) is responsible for ‘economic affairs’, which in essence means they are responsible for rationing and keeping the population – in particular the uneducated proles – poor; the Ministry of Peace (*Minipax*) maintains the perpetual war, or the illusion of perpetual war; the Ministry of Love (*Miniluv*) enforces the rule of the Party and is thus responsible for making unpersons of people who appear to threaten the Party’s rule, or reforming them by way of torture; the Ministry of Truth (*Minitrueth*), where the three central characters all work,¹³ is charged with spreading Party propaganda, revising history to fit the Party doctrine, and creating entertainment for the populace that does not inspire thoughtcrime. If the theory that Oceania is fictional and that the Party only controls Airstrip One is true, the Ministries are all concerned with the same thing: maintaining the illusion that the Party requires to maintain their ironclad grip on their power.

It is reasonable to assume that because any information about the world outside Airstrip One is either lacking or of dubious authenticity, nothing of consequence to the story happens outside Airstrip One. For all we know, the world outside could be a nuclear wasteland, a war-ridden dystopic battlefield, or a peaceful and prosperous utopia, but for the reader, it is ultimately irrelevant. Airstrip One, however, is very important, and London in particular, and one could call that the entire world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, at least in terms of what is actually built by the author as a diegetically truthful account. It is a nontrivial distinction in this novel – in fact, the distinction between truth and Party propaganda is incredibly hard to discern at times, and the propaganda becomes almost a parallel diegetic reality unto itself. A controversial topic in academic study of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the inspiration for Ingsoc¹⁴ and the Party, and whether it is a satire on fascist totalitarianism or stalinist totalitarianism. Currently, the apparent consensus is that the topic is an academic sidetrack completely irrelevant to the message of the book. Whether Ingsoc is a parody of fascism – or perhaps more specifically, nazism, or national socialism – or a parody of Stalinist communism does not appear to be particularly important, or at least not as important as the more general anti-totalitarian stance implicit in the

13 Apart from O’Brien, who is an agent of the Thought Police and thus works for the Ministry of Love.

14 Ingsoc is Newspeak for “English Socialism”, the political stance of the Party.

narrative, and the equally implicit suggestion that either extreme is just as dangerous and not particularly different once they attain the power they seek.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the political ideology of the Party is not important to the story in the ordinary sense, it is important by virtue of its de facto absence. When O'Brien says that "[t]he object of power is power" (302), he is referring to the Party's lack of rationale for their actions apart from their goal – having and maintaining power, to which end everything the Party does is to serve that goal, proving that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This singular pursuit of power at the expense of everything else is likely intended to serve two narrative purposes – dissociating the Party from real-world politics, and to suggest that politics in the real world, at least in some places, is essentially like, or tends towards, the condition of politics in Airstrip One, assuring the reader's repudiation of the Party's ideology. In this sense the Party represents the worst excesses of totalitarianism, taken to a point where the Party's villainy is beyond conventional analysis.

While this would allow the reader to fill in the ideological blanks – recalling that both Nazism and Stalinism have used socialism as a descriptive moniker¹⁵, and that 'socialism' is the closest thing to an ideological descriptor of the political stance of the Party we as readers are given, despite it being too nebulous to say anything really useful about the ideological roots of the Party – Orwell's intent appears not to have been to slander one side of the political spectrum in favour of another, but rather to prove that totalitarian regimes are largely the same, regardless of the ideology used to justify it. The lack of any discernable ideological connection deliberately assures that no matter what political and ideological stances the reader may have taken, the Party can never be seen as a force for good, but it also appears to have had the side effect of making sure the novel stays relevant even as political ideologies come and go.

The Orwellian Concept

If the task of summarising in a single argument how much *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has eclipsed the other works of George Orwell was put to me, my first instinct would be to reply that the book is almost singlehandedly responsible for the adjective 'Orwellian', and is therefore responsible for embedding itself in the public consciousness along with the

15 It is important to note that the use of socialism in the context of Nazism, despite being part of the etymological origin of the term 'Nazi', is at best a smoke screen. The political ideology of the Nazis had next to nothing in common with socialism.

author. I say ‘almost singlehandedly’, since one could argue that *Animal Farm*, to a certain extent, has been part of forming the public view of Orwell’s authorship, as those two books are his most widely read texts, and by far the most influential. But while *Animal Farm* functions admirably as a parable for both the Russian Revolution and Stalinism while simultaneously serving as a reminder of how almost all revolutions have a tendency to go full circle, i.e. the revolutionary leaders eventually betraying its principles and reverting to a system that changes nothing of consequence, the significance of *Animal Farm* is, as far as continued relevance and status in the public consciousness is concerned, surpassed by *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. However, a case can be made for *Animal Farm*’s contribution to the definition of ‘Orwellian’.

Taking into account the theory that the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was at least in part modeled on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union under Stalin, the connection between *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* becomes more apparent. The Party is suggested to have risen to power by exploiting some power instability in the wake of a devastating war, not entirely unlike the animals’ revolution in *Animal Farm*. This brings forth the implication that the Party and the revolutionary animals have the full-circle revolution in common, but where *Animal Farm* makes this point the *raison d’être* of the story, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is content with the subtext of the Party being a revolution corrupted to the unrecognisable. Consequently, the definition of ‘Orwellian’, which is most commonly used to describe government-sanctioned surveillance beyond what is considered acceptable, also includes historical revision and forgery in service of the powers that be, which is a central feature of both *Animal Farm* and the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. A particularly striking example of Orwellianism in *Animal Farm* is the gradual revision of the revolutionary manifesto, from a concise set of rules that gets amended and struck over the course of the story to illustrate the gradual reinstatement of the old pre-revolutionary ways, until only a single rule remains, which has also been altered to countermand the entire message of the animals’ revolution, thus essentially leaving the bulk of the animals where they were before the revolution, with the only difference being the hand – or trotter – holding the whip.

Nevertheless, the contribution of *Animal Farm* to the definition of Orwellianism is ancillary, as it does not seem to add anything essential to the aspects of the term that is not in some way covered by *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Similarly, a single aspect of the larger definition of Orwellianism appears to overshadow almost all other elements of the term in popular usage, namely government surveillance¹⁶, and particularly in a domestic

16 At the time of writing this thesis, the revelation of the PRISM surveillance program carried out by the NSA and leaked by Edward Snowden is still having ramifications across the world, thus current usage can

context, i.e. the government spying on its own people. This distracts from the larger picture, as Orwellianism appears to be applicable to any kind of behaviour reminiscent of police states and dictatorships satirised in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, particularly practices such as revising and/or censoring all literature (fiction and non-fiction) to be more in tune with governmental doctrine, exercising excessive media control for the purpose of spreading the government's propaganda, and perpetuating a state of war to keep the populace in line.

One might wonder why Orwell gained such prominence for his description of a totalitarian dystopia, since he was quite certainly not the first to do it. Sources claim he was more or less directly inspired by *We*, a novel by Soviet author Yevgeny Zamyatin, with some sources going as far as saying that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* arose from Orwell's project to create a localised adaptation of *We*. Another possible influence is the novel *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis, which examines a potential scenario for a fascist takeover of the United States. While not as often mentioned as *We* in connection with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* these days, it has a few differences and similarities that could be seen as particularly interesting when compared with Orwell's book. Lewis wrote *It Can't Happen Here* in 1935, when the world was on the brink of another World War, and the rise of fascism overseas coupled with strong anti-Communist sentiments in the US appeared to have struck a note with Lewis, as the message of *It Can't Happen Here* is explicitly that if anti-communist – or, more specifically, anti-Stalinist – ideology is taken to its logical extreme, the consequence is a fascist society that is just as brutal as its sworn enemy, if not more so.

The connection to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* lies in the idea that Stalin's version of communism is just as totalitarian and brutally oppressive as a fascist dictatorship, but where the comparison is more overt in Lewis' novel, Orwell adopts a less obvious comparison that has not the same potential for polarisation as *It Can't Happen Here* simply because Orwell's Party has no clearly defined ideology, apart from the desire to remain in power and exercise this power. As such, the Party is technically politically neutral. Because all domestic political opposition has been removed, the Party does not have to justify its actions to the citizens of Oceania through any ideological dogma. The novel is written from the perspective of a man born within the confines of the Party machinery, which for all we as readers know could have been active for over thirty years (or more, as nobody really knows the exact year anymore) and to him, the monolithic Party is neither politically left nor right, because such distinctions have been rendered obsolete. There is only Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia – the latter two dangerously indistinguishable from

appear to be at least in part coloured by that particular context.

the Oceanian perspective. One of them is at war with Oceania, the other is allied with Oceania, and which continent is what is irrelevant – all that matters is that Oceania is at war.

In a sense, while Lewis explores how power corrupts political intentions, Orwell takes a look at how far that corruption can go. To the Inner Party, power is not the means to an end, but an end in itself – power for the sake of power, a regime that is only interested in maintaining its own grip on the populace by any means necessary, and the implications contained in the various demonstrations throughout the novel of the ways the Party exercises its control over the population of Airstrip One are grave. One of the more disturbing examples of the Party's modus operandi, and a noteworthy example of Orwellian control, is the concept of 'doublethink'. Doublethink, to provide a short description, is the concept of simultaneously making a conscious decision to believe something that reason would dictate to be a lie, and at the same time denying that what you have consciously decided to believe is a lie. In this way, the lie constantly remains one step ahead of the truth, and it is through doublethink that the Party retains its power despite blatantly lying to the public on numerous occasions, best exemplified by its abrupt change of ally and enemy in the Oceania/Eurasia/Eastasia war during a rally at first condemning Eurasia, before the speaker is given a message in the middle of his speech changing the enemy from Eurasia to Eastasia. Notably, the audience follows the new directive to the letter, reacting with shock and horror when they see that the banners and pamphlets printed for the occasion condemn the wrong nation, but instead of realising and questioning the absurdity of the situation, they elect to believe – through doublethink – that the banners and pamphlets have been sabotaged by the Brotherhood. (Orwell 209-11)

Attempting to find out why Orwell's dystopian tale of caution is now arguably ingrained in the public consciousness to a greater degree than Huxley's *Brave New World*, Zamyatin's *We*, or Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* has the capacity to foster extensive speculation, but ultimately, Orwell appears to have made his story the more culturally pervasive and enduring compared to the other novels mentioned. It does not, as *Animal Farm* and *It Can't Happen Here* do, show how the revolution turns full circle and transforms the revolutionaries into oppressors themselves without the situation really becoming any better. Instead, Orwell offers a glimpse into the future of a totalitarian regime. The potentially revolutionary origins of the Party are inconsequential, and the only thing that appears to matter in Orwell's story is the fact that the brutal tactics of the Party could just as easily be employed by a totalitarian version of your personally preferred political wing as its diametrical opposite, which is why countless pundits on either side of the

political spectrum have wielded *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in their denouncement of their political enemies, thus perpetuating the novel's relevance and popularity far beyond that of its peers.

Another comparison that is worth drawing is between *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and a novel that turns the premise of Orwell's novel on its head – *Jennifer Government*, a novel written in 2003 by Max Barry. Instead of the all-powerful and omniscient one-party government keeping the populace under a relentlessly ruthless regime, *Jennifer Government* examines a society where the government is completely emasculated in the face of corporate imperialism. The methods of power play used by the corporate empires in *Jennifer Government* and the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are in many ways comparable, but the most striking example of corporate power in *Jennifer Government* is the replacement of surnames – instead of family names, people are named after the company they are employed at, e.g. John Nike, Violet ExxonMobil and the titular Jennifer Government. It is thus possible to extrapolate from this comparison that a central aspect of classic Orwellianism is the tendency on part of the ruling elite – be it corporations or government – to use their power to tie themselves inextricably to the functions of society, and employing doublethink to make the populace believe that things have either always been like this or that it is somehow necessary for things to be like this to be able to maintain a semblance of order and civilisation.

In summation, Orwellianism is unconcerned with the identity or intent of the oppressors, but instead has more to do with the methods employed – surveillance, doublethink, fostering a culture of fear and paranoia in the populace, making the regime an intrinsic part of the fabric of society, and so forth. It is a powerful image, and Orwell's dystopic vision of the future makes for a harrowing understanding of what atrocities power, and the desire for power, in its most basic form, can beget. But what makes *Nineteen Eighty-Four* such a fundamental part of our perception of society and power, even today?

It Cannot Happen Here... Can It?

To say that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been an influential novel is an uncontroversial statement, as is saying that its continued relevance possibly stems from the fear that the future described in the novel might come to pass in one form or another one day. There is perhaps a strange irony in this, that a novel that discusses at length how fear can be used as a form of control keeps its relevance through the fear it inspires in its

readers, but perhaps Orwell is alluding to the then-recently late US President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inaugural address, where he asserted that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself", provided that "fear itself" is seen in this context as artificial fear designed to be used as a tool to control the populace. Nevertheless, Orwell does not share Roosevelt's optimistic view, as "fear itself", as portrayed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is a very real thing, and it is just around the corner. The future of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been lurking ominously in the shadows for quite some time, having not only outlasted the year the novel is named for, but also the Cold War and the Soviet Union, and still remains a plausible warning, and so the question is now twofold: What is *Nineteen Eighty-Four* warning us against, and how has that warning stood the test of time with such resilience?

Picking up the thread from earlier, I will argue that the apolitical portrayal of the Party is one of the central reasons for the continued relevance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Political entities like ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, the British Empire, the Soviet Union, and the United States rise and fall, regardless of their size at any given point in time, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* not only acknowledges this, but because of the absence of any hints as to what the Party believes in ideologically, the Party could have risen from just about any political entity. These ambiguous origins, combined with a present so corrupted by historical revision and information control that people hardly know what the year is anymore, let alone what the only political party left in the country stands for in any ideological sense, contribute to making the Party an obvious enemy for the reader, because it can be what the reader wants it to be, only perverted into the single-mindedly power-focused political force seen in the novel, unrecognisable in the present from its potential predecessors.

The Party's stringent refusal to be categorised politically is one of the main points that differentiates *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from *It Can't Happen Here*, which all but explicitly states that the antagonistic ideology is fascism. This in turn could have made Lewis' novel seem dated during the Cold War, a time when large-scale fascism was largely believed to be defeated, and it was therefore considered insignificant as an ideology. Essentially, fascism as a political force to be reckoned with was rendered obsolete when the Cold War came into full force, supplanted in the West by communism, making a novel about a fascist coup of the US seem like an anachronism. The central theme of *It Can't Happen Here* could certainly be seen as less overtly political, making it a more general warning that no nation is immune against a coup d'état if it is done correctly, but the fact remains that the antagonistic ideology is made explicit in the novel makes it harder to divorce the message from the then-contemporary political climate which, while still prudent during the Cold War to a certain extent on account of the anti-stalinist sentiment that drives

the fascists in *It Can't Happen Here*, still falls victim to the myriad of shifts in the global political structure from the Second World War up until today.

Also, while the surveillance aspect of the future of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not the focal point of the novel, it has proved itself to be the most pervasive and popular aspect of the novel, having carved out a solid niche for itself in the public consciousness, making the ominous slogan of “Big Brother is watching you” a memetic phrase that brings forth images of oppressive and constant surveillance instantly, in some cases despite people not having read the novel at all. This happened despite the fact that surveillance, while integral to the fundament of the Party’s power, is not the main point of the book. The true horror of the Party is not surveillance, but doublethink, or the fact that the Party has made itself the epitome of infallibility in the eyes of its subjects so thoroughly that said subjects will accept any falsehood as absolute truth as long as it is part of the Party doctrine. In other words, the punchline of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not “Big Brother is watching you”, but “two plus two equals five”. Information, as established earlier, is power, and control over information is absolute power as far as the Party is concerned. Reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* today to see what Orwell was trying to say can be a difficult exercise if one also wishes to do this without comparing the author’s prophecies to contemporary society. Part of it can be self-fulfilling; DPR Korea¹⁷ can in many ways be seen as bearing a frightening resemblance to Airstrip One, as Christopher Hitchens noted in *God is Not Great*; simultaneously, similarities on a smaller scale, yet equally insidious, can be seen in our Western society, especially with reference to the 2013 mass surveillance scandals, where the NSA and GCHQ appear to have outstretched their allotted mandate in ways that are, for lack of a better term, Orwellian.

It is the fear of the dystopian depiction of the future that to a large degree has informed the longevity of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s relevance, and the levels of truth and fiction within the diegesis of the novel can be staggering when taking into account how much of the story relies on information that has been perverted to the unrecognisable through doublethink. The constant rewriting of history as recent as a few seconds earlier – as exemplified at the aforementioned rally where the opponent and ally in the perpetual war changes in the middle of a speech to the crowd with almost no problem – can be seen as something more insidious than control over history and truth. Supposing the earlier theory that none of the nations described – Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia – truly exist, but is part of the fiction told the people of Airstrip One to keep them in line, then the question would be why they change which nation is fighting against Oceania and which is their ally so often, if it is all a fiction. First of all, if the same illusion is

17 The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the official name of North Korea used in international politics.

maintained for too long, the people would have time to consider the situation, which could be problematic for further sustenance of the perpetual war, especially if the truth is that the war is spurious. Therefore, Oceania needs a new enemy once in a while to avoid having the motive for war questioned, and it also has the added bonus of keeping the patriotic fervour in Oceania fresh. Second, the constant changing of enemy and ally can also be seen as a way not just to maintain the perpetual war and the subsequent surge in domestic patriotism, but to make the populace doubtful of their memory and in turn make them depend less on it, which will make them believe anything they are told by the authorities, who already control the media, both news and entertainment. By constantly contradicting itself, the resulting confusion means that eventually, personal memory will be seen as less reliable. As the populace is taught to distrust their own memory to such an extent, their minds will consequently either become more malleable and receptive of the Party's propaganda and historical revisions, or they will go insane as a consequence of this process, which bears a semblance to the act of gaslighting¹⁸.

So why does this make *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a science fiction novel, and why is it important that we read it as a science fiction novel? It is science fiction because it is a thought experiment – specifically, a political one – given a diegesis to develop in, and its status as science fiction is made important because its prophetic potential is still relevant as it approaches its seventieth year in circulation. While the last point strictly speaking is not an absolute necessity for defining *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as science fiction, it is a hallmark of excellence in some forms of the genre – but admittedly not all – to create a futuristic vision pervasive enough to outlast the publicity given on its release, and in particular on outlasting the author himself. Consequently, the importance of reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as science fiction is precisely because the dystopia Orwell imagined is still a possibility, and will likely remain so unless we enter a post-scarcity society¹⁹, or an artificial intelligence sometime after a technological singularity²⁰ is declared a benevolent ruler capable of rational and fair judgment at a level humanity cannot attend individually or collectively.

Until either of these events occur, or something similar to either of them, it is likely that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will remain relevant in political and academic discourse for the foreseeable future. It is this relevance that science fiction should embrace, because it

18 From the film *Gaslight* (1944) and the play it is based on, gaslighting is the act of deliberately misinforming someone to make them doubt their memory, perception and/or sanity.

19 A society that has found a way to synthesise food and other essentials, thus avoiding the possibility of depleting natural resources.

20 The technological singularity is a hypothesised point in time where artificial intelligence surpasses human intelligence, which will likely herald a massive paradigm shift for humanity, as discussed by John von Neumann and popularised by Vernor Vinge and Ray Kurzweil.

transcends the traditional border line between popular relevance and academic relevance, and has persistently maintained its high standing in both areas since its publishing. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* could be a monumental watershed moment for sf, a moment that elevates the genre from pure entertainment to art, or at least an area worth extensive academic scrutiny. If sf authors feel that the genre is looked down upon by the tastemakers of “Literature with a capital L”, they could do far worse than claiming a stake in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an integral part of the sf canon.

Part III: Snow Crash

If *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is indisputably part of the high literary canon, then *Snow Crash* is indisputably part of the science fiction canon. Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel has garnered favourable comparisons with Thomas Pynchon and William Gibson, and some of the technological advances depicted in the novel have inspired real-life pieces of technology in the years since the book was released. The novel details the exploits of Hiro Protagonist, a half-Asian²¹, half African-American freelance hacker, intelligence gatherer and swordsman with a day job as a Deliverator, delivering pizza for the Mafia; and Y.T., Hiro's business partner by circumstance, a fifteen year old skateboarding Kourier for RadiKS. They find themselves, over the course of the novel, embroiled in a battle against a nefarious cult leader²² who plans to strip the world of free will through a metavirus – the titular Snow Crash – that attacks the brainstem of those exposed to it.

In this part of the thesis, I will argue that *Snow Crash* is a seminal science fiction novel, complete with its own place in the internal spectrum of science fiction subgenres as an early example and codifier of post-cyberpunk. This will be followed by an examination of how the novel has influenced the present and might influence the future, and finally a revisit of the escapism accusation, examining whether entertainment and literary value can coexist and whether they do so in *Snow Crash*. But first and foremost, we need to establish what post-cyberpunk is, and where we can place it within the realm of science fiction.

Dystopia Rules OK – The World of Snow Crash and the Beginning of Post-Cyberpunk

In order to define post-cyberpunk, we must trace its origin, which can be found through its immediate predecessor – cyberpunk. The comparison to the works of William Gibson often drawn in reviews of *Snow Crash* is in this sense not coincidental. Over the course of the 1980s, the cyberpunk movement, spearheaded by Gibson's *Neuromancer*, had become one of the most important developments in science fiction since the New Wave in the '60s, and brought with it newfound critical acclaim. However, like any cultural – or indeed, counter-cultural – movement based in some capacity on current affairs, the cyberpunk ethos was doomed to lose some, if not all, of its momentum as time went on. According to Lawrence Person's 1998 essay 'Notes Toward a Post-Cyberpunk Manifesto', cyberpunk is fundamentally dystopian works set in the near future, defined by the clichéd expression

21 Hiro's mother is Korean by way of Japan (19).

22 The cult leader in question is, for all intents and purposes, made to be a thinly-veiled reference to Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard.

“high tech/low life”, experienced through the viewpoint of marginalised, alienated loners (URL) on the edges of a society where the rapid rise of technological advancement enhances the general feeling of alienation.

The imagery used by Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and their contemporaries within the cyberpunk movement to describe and breathe life into their dystopian worlds evokes a ghost of literature past – specifically that of Raymond Chandler and the hard-boiled detective novels he commonly represents in the popular consciousness. Joe Nazare explores this link in his essay “Marlowe in Mirrorshades”, and touches upon a link between the *roman noir* detective genre and science fiction far beyond cyberpunk, via their shared pulp origins and occasional crossovers since then in novels like Alfred Bester’s *The Demolished Man* and Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and ultimately to Ridley Scott’s 1982 film adaptation of the latter novel, *Blade Runner*, which “not only looks back to Chandler but anticipates cyberpunk” (Nazare 384). As the cinematic predecessor of the cyberpunk aesthetic, *Blade Runner* is firmly entrenched in the *noir* mould, using a Chandleresque narrative to enhance the dystopian feel of the setting, and in the process established several visual hallmarks of the cyberpunk genre – skyscrapers, neon advertisements, rainy nights, increased multiculturalism with particular emphasis on the influx of the then-strong Japanese economy, and so forth.

Visually, *Blade Runner* was a watershed moment as far as setting the tone for cyberpunk is concerned, but as it was based on Philip K. Dick’s novel, which was written in 1968, the main divergence between archetypal cyberpunk and *Blade Runner* is the idea of cyberspace, or a virtual network environment, which is largely absent in *Blade Runner*, but often made an integral part of cyberpunk narratives. *Blade Runner* does, however, appear to engage in a debate that is closely related to archetypal cyberpunk, but from a different angle – the concept of posthumanism and transhumanism²³, represented in *Blade Runner* by the replicants, artificially created and genetically engineered posthumans. Commonly, cyberpunk narratives deal more explicitly with transhumanism in the form of biological augmentation of various kinds – biomechanical, nanotechnological, et cetera – often used symbolically to represent the increase in connection between man and machine, and often at the expense of human interaction. An example of this is the eponymous protagonist of William Gibson’s short story ‘Johnny Mnemonic’, who works as a data courier, transporting digital data too sensitive for online transmission in a cybernetic implant in his head. The film adaptation of the short story, released in 1995, expands upon the concept by making a point

23 The correct term might arguably be *posthumanism* in this case, at least from what I have been able to gather from a brief examination of the meaning of the terms. Posthumans are usually born or created in a specific way, while transhumans are born ordinary and made different.

to reveal that Johnny's implant requires storage space from his brain, which means that he had to dump his childhood memories to make room for the implant.

At a glance, cyberpunk appears to invite authors to explore thought experiments of similar nature, with most of the differences being either nominal or a matter of degrees. This implies that the core concepts are firmly entrenched in the '*roman noir* meets near-future science fiction' aspect, focused on the effects of rampant consumerism, increased connectivity through computer networks, corporations with more power (de facto or otherwise) than nations, an increase in availability of consumer electronics, and the hero standing on the edge of society, chosen by the narrative to bring down the corrupt power structure *du jour*. For the most part, these distinguishing features are, according to Altman's method, semantics. The syntax could be said to be the final point mentioned above about the outsider hero, which provides a good contrast to their post-cyberpunk counterpart, who often possess similar characteristics to that of the cyberpunk protagonist, but they have found their purpose inside society rather than on its fringes. Also, in a cyberpunk novel, the protagonist's skill set – usually making him a hacker of sorts – would commonly make them a criminal or outlaw in that world. By contrast, the same skills in a post-cyberpunk world would usually make the protagonist a valued member of society, often allowing them to do more honest work rather than resort to black/grey-market jobs for other people and organisations operating outside the law. Lawrence Person defines the typical cyberpunk protagonist and setting like this:

Classic cyberpunk characters were marginalized, alienated loners who lived on the edge of society in generally dystopic futures where daily life was impacted by rapid technological change, an ubiquitous datsphere of computerized information, and invasive modification of the human body.

[...] The best of cyberpunk conveyed huge cognitive loads about the future by depicting (in best "show, don't tell" fashion) the interaction of its characters with the quotidian minutia of their environment. In the way they interacted with their clothes, their furniture, their decks and spex, cyberpunk characters told you more about the society they lived in than "classic" SF stories did through their interaction with robots and rocketships.

[...] Cyberpunk characters frequently seek to topple or exploit corrupt social orders.

[...] Cyberpunk tended to be cold, detached and alienated. (Person URL)

Post-cyberpunk does not stray too far from the cyberpunk aesthetic, but the main difference lies in the amount of pessimism and anarchistic dogma involved. Rather than engaging in exceedingly dystopic or grim scenarios, post-cyberpunk often strikes a middle ground between dystopia and utopia, being more willing to see shades of grey in both sides rather than the comparatively dogmatic black-and-grey morality that is more prevalent in cyberpunk. For instance, a change to status quo in a post-cyberpunk novel happens from within the society by the people who inhabit this society and spares society at large while overthrowing the corrupted elements, as opposed to the cyberpunk novel equivalent, which

would be a rebellion from outside of society at large that aims to tear down the entire system as it stands, ostensibly uncaring about any collateral damage their revolution would incur.

In this sense, post-cyberpunk acts as a deconstruction of a common theme in cyberpunk, an observation that is reminiscent of an observation Nazare quotes in his article, which states that *Snow Crash* is “a parodic sendup of all things cyberpunk”. Nazare responds to this statement by saying that rather than being a bona fide parody, the novel “actually is another quintessential cyberpunk novel that parodically yet strategically invokes the Chanderlesque” (394), but I would argue that Nazare’s statement does not necessarily contradict the assertion that *Snow Crash* is post-cyberpunk. He concedes the satire inherent in the novel, but in many ways, where others would see as an evolution of the genre, i.e. from cyberpunk to post-cyberpunk, he sees the development as inconsequential to his central thesis, which is focused on the connection between cyberpunk and the Chanderlesque *roman noir*. As far as Nazare is concerned, there appears to be no real difference in this area between cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk, but rather than getting sidetracked by the distinction, he simply disregards the notion of post-cyberpunk, likely due to the unnecessary complications it would bring to his argument.

In the long run, Nazare’s non-distinction between cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk is of little consequence to this thesis, but his comment on the way *Snow Crash* evokes the Chanderlesque is worth examining, because it falls in step with the understanding of post-cyberpunk as a self-reflexive view on the genre it is based on. As a deconstruction of cyberpunk, post-cyberpunk certainly has a distinct overlap with the genre it deconstructs, but deconstruction is not the only purpose of post-cyberpunk. In fact, post-cyberpunk could be seen as a natural evolutionary stage of cyberpunk from a specific movement and condensed group of authors producing similar works into a broader and more liberal subgenre of science fiction. In this vein, post-cyberpunk acts as a reaction to the overly bleak visions of the future commonly posited in cyberpunk. The reaction, at least in *Snow Crash*, is to take the elements and conventions of cyberpunk and play with them in various ways, from outright parody to subversion, inversion and aversion of cyberpunk tropes.

One of the ways in which Stephenson experiments with the conventions of cyberpunk is by transferring the protagonist from the dangerous fringes of society to a job most people would see as comparatively comfortable life in a franchised and privatised California, where his primary source of income is his day job for CosaNostra Pizza as a Deliverator, which essentially means that he delivers pizza for the Mafia. Far more about the pizza delivery career in *Snow Crash* has changed than the job title and the employer, though, and most of the differences between that world and ours on that field seems to be a consequence of the Mafia monopoly on pizza delivery in what used to be the United States:

Just a single principle: The Deliverator stands tall, your pie in thirty minutes or you can have it free, shoot the driver, take his car, file a class-action suit. The Deliverator has been working this job for six months now, a rich and lengthy tenure by his standards, and has never delivered a pizza in more than twenty-one minutes.

Oh, they used to argue over times, many corporate driver-years lost to it: homeowners, red-faced and sweaty with their own lies, stinking of Old Spice and job-related stress, standing in their glowing yellow doorways brandishing their Seikos and waving at the clock over the kitchen sink, I swear, can't you guys tell the time?

Didn't happen anymore. Pizza delivery a major industry. A managed industry. People went to CosaNostra Pizza University for four years just to learn it. Came in its doors unable to write an English sentence, from Abkhazia, Rwanda, Guanajuato, South Jersey, and came out knowing more about pizza than a bedouin knows about sand. (Stephenson 3)

By turning an essentially mundane job such as delivering pizzas into a prestigious high-risk job that requires four years of specialised university-level education and is run by an organisation commonly associated with criminal activity that runs a legitimate business, Stephenson does more than show a simple willingness to play around with the conventions established by preceding cyberpunk works, but he also suggests a new way of approaching a recently established subgenre of science fiction rather than creating an entirely new subgenre from scratch. And as the quote above shows, Nazare's assessment that the novel evokes Chandler's mood of description in a parodic or satirical manner is an accurate observation more than anything. Subtle jokes, such as the South Jersey reference²⁴, permeate the narrative, which helps lessen the dystopian feel of the novel by making the setting more relatable in spite of the substantial amounts of reality between reality and the diegesis of *Snow Crash*.

Post-cyberpunk as a whole is also at least in part influenced by its placement in time. The 1990s brought several changes to the world from the preceding decade – prominently, the Japanese economy fell on hard times, which rendered the archetypal cyberpunk vision of a future dominated by Japan in various forms obsolete. After the Japanese economy crashed, the idea that Japan could achieve that sort of economic superiority was a moot point, and so, at least for a while, was the idea of any similar cultural dominance. That changed with the sudden interest in the West for manga and animé, and provided future post-cyberpunk narratives with an interesting twist – the economic hegemony was out, but the cultural influx eventually replaced it. *Snow Crash*, for all intents and purposes, does not take the so-called “lost decade” into account, likely because Stephenson would have been writing the book before and during the economic collapse in Japan, possibly under the assumption that Japan would make a hasty recovery.

²⁴ South Jersey refers to a part of the state of New Jersey. The joke is the implication that, like those coming from Abkhazia, Rwanda and Guanajuato, people from South Jersey do not speak English.

Then again, a frustrating conundrum with *Snow Crash* is trying to figure out when it is set. Since Hiro's father was part of the Second World War, and Uncle Enzo is a Vietnam veteran, it is implied that the novel is not set in the future, but rather an alternate present or a very immediate future, no more than a couple of years or so after 1992, when the book was first published. However, considering the radical changes in the world at large and how used to these changes people have become, it is more reasonable to assume an alternate present, or an alternate near-future. Further, it could be supposed that the world that *Snow Crash* is set in has had the explosive development of technology for a longer period of time than our world had at the time, and that this has had a profound effect on the world, particularly in terms of which countries has seized what opportunities in the technological boost at the heart of this diegesis. The novel seems to hint at a lot of development elsewhere, such as Hong Kong apparently becoming independent and franchised as Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong, as opposed to being handed over to China – an event that was still five years away when *Snow Crash* was released. In short, the anachronisms in the novel's timeline suggests an alternate 1992 or an alternate near-future thereof.

In *Snow Crash*, Japan is implied to be far better off economically than the United States, which has been privatised to an extreme degree. The CIA has been merged with the Library of Congress and privatised, becoming an organisation called the Central Intelligence Corporation, or the CIC. Police services, military forces and prisons are privately owned for-profit organisations, at least in the US. Even the roads are privately owned, and people live in state franchises and suburban enclaves, or "burbclaves" for short. Hyperinflation have reduced the dollar in value to such an extent that trillion dollar bills (depicting Ed Meese) are almost disregarded in favour of the quadrillion dollar bill (depicting Ronald Reagan, and given the nickname "Gipper"), which is still used as a small bill. Rather than relying on a hyperinflated currency, most people prefer alternate non-inflated currencies like yen or the "Kongbuck", the currency of Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong, one of the most prominent corporate nation franchises²⁵ in the novel. There is a possibility that Stephenson had an ulterior motive for employing an alternate timeline as opposed to the typical near-future scenario commonly used in cyberpunk, potentially as a way of making the technology in the novel not seem dated in the future. Taking the theory on *Snow Crash* as a subtle parody of cyberpunk into consideration, one could also take this supposition on the motives for using an alternate timeline further, and say that by virtue of the rapid developments in the world of technology, cyberpunk set in a near-future scenario is destined to become outdated in a very short span of time. Instead of falling prey to the propensity to judge the present based

25 Most of what we see of these nation franchises is through their "franchulates", or franchised consulates, dotted around the US. Examples of corporate nation franchises include Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong, Nova Sicilia, Narcolombia, New South Africa, and Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates.

on how far away we are from fictional futures depicted in various media, Stephenson creates an alternate timeline that gives the present the technological advances his narrative needs, and in this way, the novel's premise purely exists to serve the narrative, and not the other way around.

The parodical elements of *Snow Crash* also appear to take issue with how the protagonists are commonly portrayed in cyberpunk. Hiro's unusual heritage and skill with samurai swords is occasionally brought attention to, such as when Hiro is challenged by a neo-traditionalist Nipponese²⁶ businessman in the Metaverse who disputes whether Hiro's possession of his swords is honourable. They engage in single combat using their katanas, where the businessman loses to Hiro (79-82). This event is recalled later in the novel, when Hiro is confronted in Oregon by a group of racist thugs from a local New South Africa franchulate, but this time, it is Hiro's ethnicity that is the problem, and it takes place in Reality as opposed to the Metaverse (281-2). He is also a citizen of Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong, which helps when Hiro and Y.T. needs to shake off a group of hostile Tadzhiki taxi drivers after Y.T. escapes from The Clink, a privatised prison (77). On top of all this, Hiro was an early adopter of for the Metaverse and helped develop it, which means his status there is almost legendary, going so far as to be described in the narrative as "a warrior prince" (58).

The differences between Hiro and the average cyberpunk protagonist may not be readily apparent from this description, but there are several indicators that Hiro is very different. First of all, the anachronistic weapon has practical purposes – guns are forbidden in Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong, and sword fights appear to be a popular pastime in the Metaverse and The Black Sun, as out of the "couple of thousand people" who can enter The Black Sun (38), 890 have participated in a sword fight inside (83). Then there is the matter of Hiro's sources of income – his jobs. Not only does Hiro have a job; he has, at the start of the novel, two of them. The first job has already been mentioned: Deliverator for CosaNostra Pizza. As previously discussed, the stakes for Deliverators are much higher in *Snow Crash* than in the real world, but this plays upon the reader's perception of the profession of delivering pizza for a living as a menial and low-risk job, and equally important, it gives Hiro a responsibility to society that is often absent in his cyberpunk counterparts. To the cyberpunk protagonists, ties to society like day jobs are usually there to be broken, if they are there at all:

26 In *Snow Crash*, Japan is consistently referred to as Nippon. This is likely meant to signify the power that Japan holds in the novel's diegesis, as Nippon is the more formal of the two names Japan has in Japanese, commonly reserved for official purposes.

Like their cyberpunk forebears, postcyberpunk works immerse the reader in richly detailed and skillfully nuanced futures, but ones whose characters and settings frequently hail from, for lack of a better term, the middle class. (And we do need a better term; here in the United States, economic mobility has rendered the concept of “class” nearly obsolete.) Postcyberpunk characters frequently have families, and sometimes even children. [...] They’re anchored in their society rather than adrift in it. They have careers, friends, obligations, responsibilities, and all the trappings of an “ordinary” life. Or, to put it another way, their social landscape is often as detailed and nuanced as the technological one. (Person URL)

Between people like Da5id Meier, Juanita Marquez, and eventually Y.T. to a certain extent, Hiro is seen to have friends, so the loner stereotype is averted, if only just. But in addition to his job as a Deliverator for CosaNostra Pizza and his sideline as a hacker, Hiro also works as a stringer for the CIC. Since the privatisation and merger of the CIA and the Library of Congress, the latter has largely become a library of digital information analogous to Wikipedia, except that instead of being a completely open platform to which anyone can add information and everyone can read the information for free, the Library is a closed directory that requires payment to access, and the CIC employs people like Hiro on a part-time basis as stringers, who gather and submit information to the Library, and then the stringer gets paid if the information he brings in is accessed by the clients:

The business is a simple one. Hiro collects information. It may be gossip, videotape, audiotape, a fragment of a computer disk, a xerox of a document. It can even be a joke based on the latest highly publicized disaster.

He uploads it to the CIC database – the Library, formerly the Library of Congress, but no one calls it that anymore. Most people are not entirely clear on what the word “congress” means. And even the word “library” is getting hazy. It used to be a place full of books, mostly old ones. Then they began to include videotapes, records, and magazines. Then all of the information got converted into machine-readable form, which is to say, ones and zeroes. And as the number of media grew, the material became more up to date, and the methods for searching the Library became more sophisticated, it approached the point where there was no substantive difference between the Library of Congress and the Central Intelligence Agency. Fortuitously, this happened just as the government was falling apart anyway. So they merged and kicked up a big fat stock offering.

Millions of other CIC stringers are uploading millions of other fragments at the same time. CIC’s clients, mostly large corporations and Sovereigns, rifle through the Library looking for useful information, and if they find a use for something that Hiro put into it, Hiro gets paid.

A year ago, he uploaded an entire first-draft film script that he stole from an agent’s wastebasket in Burbank. Half a dozen studios wanted to see it. He ate and vacationed off of that one for six months.

Since then, times have been leaner. He has been learning the hard way that 99 percent of the information in the Library never gets used at all. (20-1)

There is also the reason for Hiro not making a living through programming – the gentrification of the coding professions. It is at least heavily implied throughout the novel that hackers have largely gone corporate by this point in time, and Hiro makes it clear that he does not care much for that particular way of working:

When Hiro learned how to do this, way back fifteen years ago, a hacker could sit down and write an entire piece of software by himself. Now, that's no longer possible. Software comes out of factories, and hackers are, to a greater or lesser extent, assembly-line workers. Worse yet, they may become managers who never get to write any code themselves. (36)

This could be seen as a *coup de grace* for the cyberpunk zeitgeist – the hacker reduced to a cog in a machine. Stephenson makes this even more explicit in the novel he wrote after *Snow Crash*, *The Diamond Age*, where he builds a typical cyberpunk protagonist character, and then has him killed on page 37 of 455 (Person URL), symbolising how the cyberpunk protagonist has no role in the world he is writing. Most cyberpunk protagonists, like Bud, Stephenson's caricature from *The Diamond Age*, have some sort of cybernetic implant (often several) or is augmented in some way to be able to perform tasks beyond human capacity. By contrast, neither Hiro nor Y.T. are in any capacity augmented or superhuman, except for being exceptionally good at what they do, which at least in Y.T.'s case is within the realms of the believable – she could be seen as simply being very good at her job, and applying the skills and training gotten through her line of work creatively to the situations she find herself in – while Hiro's informed proficiency with his swords could be seen to stretch the realms of believability. However, as he is seen to practice with his swords regularly, and that he is caught off-guard at one point when using the swords in the real world, as most of his practice and fights is implied to occur in the Metaverse, the stretch is not as far as other authors might go to make their protagonists seem heroic.

And considering the possibility that Stephenson already with *Snow Crash* was satirising the heroes of cyberpunk – which, considering that he named the main character Hiro Protagonist, is very likely – a case could be made for the theory that any implausible superiority exhibited on Hiro's part is an intentional send-up of poorly written or similar protagonists. But Hiro seems to be written with an aside glance towards the reader; Stephenson is likely well aware of both the Chanderlesque tropes of the noir protagonist and how well that aesthetic ties in with the cyberpunk narrative, and wrote Hiro as a way to highlight the tropes associated with the traditional – in the sense that a tradition can be established in less than a decade – cyberpunk protagonists. It is done with a degree of subtlety, however: Hiro is shorthand for Hiroaki, but he chose his own surname, most likely as a joke, as it is implied when Y.T. says that Hiro has a “[s]tupid name”, and Hiro replies: “But you’ll never forget it.” (17) This leaves little doubt in the matter: Hiro, like Stephenson and the book itself, is very much self-aware. One could also say that in a sense, it is more likely to just be a case of Stephenson being aware of Hiro.

The Prescience of Mr. Stephenson

While certainly not to the same degree as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Snow Crash* has entered the public consciousness, albeit in a far more surreptitious manner than Orwell's novel. The Metaverse, for instance – the vast Virtual Reality-based descendant of the World Wide Web – has directly inspired several similar projects, such as the online virtual world Second Life, and technological advances since 1992 has converged in interesting ways with the novel, including Metaverse-like ideas such as Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games, which are more specialised towards the gaming aspect. Another example of the world imitating Stephenson's fiction is Google Earth, drawing at least in part inspiration from a similar program in *Snow Crash* simply called "Earth".

Considering the possibility that *Snow Crash* is less focused on providing a timeframe for its predictions – whether technological, economic, or political – than focusing on providing a narrative supported by an internally consistent premise that is somewhat difficult to locate in a temporal sense, the fact that *Snow Crash* has inspired real-life equivalents of its technology is interesting to note, as it lends both the novel and the sf genre in general a form of applicability that few other genres can claim. If a novel like *Snow Crash* can influence or inspire directions taken in processes like technological progress, the implication that sf stands in a unique position in literature gains a certain salience; very few other genres take the opportunity to speculate in the manner that science fiction has made its bread and butter doing for years. This gets back to the core tenet of this thesis, examining how these novels take thought experiments and place them in a diegesis to explore the ramifications of these ideas. According to Ben Bova, this curiosity is the closest thing sf has to a unifying feature:

To understand SF, you must look beyond the gadgets and the exotic settings. No literature should be judged by how accurately it foretells the future; nor is this science fiction's intent. Science fiction is a literature of ideas, and if an SF story makes you think, then the author will be happy. If there is one common denominator in all the many facets of science fiction, it is the willingness – and freedom – to examine any idea and stretch it to its limits. (800)

Stephenson appears to have taken this to heart when he wrote *Snow Crash*, since he is, as discussed previously, seemingly unconcerned with the novel's potential for predicting the future, but rather is more interested in creating a world that is conducive to what he wishes to explore. This appears to be the most probable cause for the novel's curious temporal location, and proves an interesting point of comparison to other sf novels. Other sf novels have a tendency to establish that the story is set so and so far into the future, a practice from which it transpires with a certain degree of inevitability that once the specified future point in time is passed, the novel gains a particular sense of obsolescence that can potentially diminish the reading experience in some form. Or, to rephrase it more concisely, one could

say that *Snow Crash* is not set in *the* future, but rather *a* future, or perhaps what used to be a future back when the novel was released, or even reimagining the present – from the standpoint of 1992 – as a different future.

Nevertheless, like previously stated, the temporal location of *Snow Crash* is ancillary, and so is the accuracy of Stephenson's technological, economic and sociopolitical predictions. What is important about the predictions Stephenson makes in *Snow Crash* is what function they serve, and more than anything, they serve, as established previously, the narrative, and the central ideas. These central ideas are centered around the concept of language and computer code, and their possible similarities. Large sections of the novel is dedicated to the exploration of what appears to have started as an idea from the author: What if the link between languages and computer code was even stronger than what it already is? Would that mean that the human mind could be hacked or rewritten by someone who knew the source code for the human mind? Could that human source code be an ancient language not widely spoken in modern society? From these questions, Stephenson builds on ancient mythology, more specifically Sumerian legends, and the Sumerian language becomes the human source code.

This does not mean that this is the only major theme *Snow Crash* bases itself on. Throughout the novel, Stephenson makes sure that the reader knows that a lot in this world is different from the world we live in, and like most cyberpunk novels, the advent of high technology does not bring a higher standard of living in all cases. For instance, accommodation standards have not improved over time – on the contrary, Hiro lives in a 20-by-30 storage container in Inglewood that he shares with musician Vitaly Chernobyl, or at least he does in the real world. In the Metaverse, because he was an early adopter of the Metaverse along with people like Da5id, Hiro enjoys a much higher status and the commodities that come with it – a high quality bespoke avatar, free access to The Black Sun, an incredibly popular and exclusive club, and a house on one of the oldest and busiest parts of the Street, the Metaverse equivalent of Broadway or the Champs Élysées. This allows the reader to conclude that most people live a better life in the Metaverse, which appears to be the truth of the matter.

A good example of this is a scene fairly early in the novel, when Hiro is on his way to The Black Sun, and he takes a moment to observe a pair of couples stepping out of a monorail at Port Zero and onto the Street, ostensibly for a double date (33-5). Both couples use store-bought avatar software, but one couple has had their avatars built from construction kits with a high degree of customisability, while the other two use cheap low-grade avatars with minimal customisability. Hiro ponders at this point why the two couples spend time together, when they seem to be from different social levels, and briefly suggests that the difference may be in age, and that they are older and younger siblings with their

respective dates. From this, it is possible to infer that despite the utopian promise of a virtual world with near-infinite possibilities, social hierarchies are still in effect in the Metaverse, but with slightly different rules than what the real world has. Hackers, as previously mentioned, are held in relatively high regard on the Metaverse, but they are also much less of a group of outsiders than they usually have been depicted in various media up until this point. Lisa Swanstrom, in her essay ‘Capsules and Nodes and Ruptures and Flows: Circulating Subjectivity in *Snow Crash*’, elaborates on the difference between the two opposing ideas of the hacker’s role in the future:

We understand a hacker to be someone who holds a special, secret knowledge that marks him (or very rarely her) as a genius. In such representations the hacker operates independently of the commercial world and who can wreak havoc upon the same corporate world by authoring viruses, hacking into private files, and distributing (or “liberating”, depending on whose perspective one receives) information. In our representations, the hacker preys upon the corporate giants that holds such sway in our world. [...]

In *Snow Crash*, however, the task most frequently aligned with hacking, i.e., coding software, is just another “meaningless job,” complete with all the corporate dressing of a negotiable salary and benefits. (69)

With Swanstrom’s notes in mind, the subversion of the cultural understanding of the hacker archetype she describes suggests that Stephenson was giving the cyberpunk community a message: The hackers will sell out eventually. They will wear white shirts and go to meetings and sit in their grey cubicle from nine to five, five days a week, just like every other ersatz revolutionary teenager who thought that the music and films and culture and ideals of their generation was going to set them free, only to find that time will eventually outrun the youth of today come tomorrow. Nevertheless, the hacker is not necessarily powerless. While Hiro resents the corporate assembly-line aesthetic, he still belongs to an elite order of hackers – the pioneers, the early adopters of the Metaverse.

The social hierarchy in the Metaverse actually appears to have two different ways to the top: money and skill – although the skill path should more correctly be called ‘skill and serendipity’. Hiro and Da5id took the latter path, and won their accolades for it, while people like the Japanese neo-traditional businessman Hiro slices apart in *The Black Sun* is likely granted access through his wealth, workplace, or both. Nevertheless, Hiro and the businessman share a few similarities, particularly in their mode of dress. The description of Hiro also includes a comment on Metaverse fashion statements:

Hiro’s avatar just looks like Hiro, with the difference that no matter what Hiro is wearing in Reality, his avatar always wears a black leather kimono. Most hacker types don’t go for garish avatars, because they know that it takes a lot more sophistication to render a realistic human face than a talking penis. Kind of the way people who really know clothing can appreciate the finer details that separate a cheap gray wool suit from an expensive hand-tailored gray wool suit. (34)

When the businessman is first described, the similarities between him and Hiro are accentuated ever so slightly:

[...] a couple of Nipponese businessmen. One is wearing uniform blue, but the other is a neo-traditional, wearing a dark kimono. And, like Hiro, he's wearing two swords – the long katana on his left hip and the one-handed wakizashi stuck diagonally in his waistband. (70)

Their choice of attire is similar, except for Hiro's choice of fabric – leather is not particularly usual for a kimono, let alone traditional. Since Hiro's physical appearance – and, by extension, his avatar, which is designed to look just like him – bears the hallmarks of his mixed heritage, the businessman takes umbrage at what he appears to perceive as cultural pilfering, on account of the combination of traditional swords and modern adaptation of the kimono. The use of the term “neo-traditional” to describe the businessman merits some deliberation in this context; Japan has had a problem with racism for some time²⁷, and the attitudes of the businessman might reflect one of a selection of possible scenarios – the most likely of these being that, much like other nations, the xenophobic elements have been driven to the political fringe, but those who hold such opinions have either become more radical and/or more outspoken. Either way, Japan appears to be largely the same as it is in our world, as further evidenced by Hiro's reluctance to work for a company owned and operated by the Japanese:

Amusement parks in the Metaverse can be fantastic, offering a wide selection of three-dimensional movies. But in the end, they're still nothing more than video games. Hiro's not so poor, yet, that he would go and write video games for this company. It's owned by the Nipponese, which is no big deal. But it's also managed by the Nipponese, which means that all the programmers have to wear white shirts and show up at eight in the morning and sit in cubicles and go to meetings.

We have previously established Hiro's aversion for menial office work as an assembly-line programmer, and the complicated relationship Hiro has with Japanese culture – his avatar dressing in a leather kimono, his use of antique Japanese swords, contrasted with his encounter with the neo-traditional businessman and the fact that Hiro inherited the weapons from his father, an African-American military truck driver during the Second World War who bested a Japanese officer in single combat and got the officer's swords in return, after Hiro's father had fled a POW camp near Nagasaki.

The altercation with the neo-traditional businessman in *The Black Sun*, along with Hiro's encounter with the racists from New South Africa, are examples that show the reader

27 More information on the UN report on racism in Japan, courtesy of BBC News, can be found here: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4671687.stm>

that the world of *Snow Crash* is not necessarily a harmonic multicultural utopia. Despite having both one multiracial and one female main character, the world around them proves to be as mired in racism and xenophobia as ours, if not even more. After all, apartheid in South Africa was drawing towards its end when *Snow Crash* was written, which Stephenson might actually have taken into account, as the rise of the New South Africa franchulates might have been formed as a reaction towards the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. Considering the fact that the novel focuses primarily on very different aspects of the futuristic society depicted, details such as the status of race and gender issues²⁸ are reminders – uncomfortable as they are – that certain elements of humanity will endure, despite the world at large decrying them as heinous and uncouth. Stereotypically, this kind of social commentary on such a level of subtlety would be considered exceedingly erudite fare for a novel about a katana-wielding hacker and pizza deliveryman and his partner, the teenaged skateboarding courier girl.

“Are You Not Entertained?": Cheap Narrative Thrills versus Sombre Prose

Among the praise *Snow Crash* has received since its release, one of the more common epithets is the “William Gibson meets Thomas Pynchon” comparison, ostensibly referring to the cyberpunk style of the former and the latter’s style of sharp-witted high-density prose. While the comparison certainly is appropriate, it does not tell the whole story. Stephenson’s willingness to provide a narrative thrill ride, for instance, is an equally important part of the novel. The world he creates with *Snow Crash* is replete with what I referred to in the introduction of this thesis as ‘cool stuff’, by which I mean the action scenes, skateboarding couriers, the unusual weaponry – Raven’s glass knives and sidecar-mounted nuclear device, Hiro’s katanas, and ‘Reason’, Fisheye’s portable gatling gun that fires shells of depleted uranium – and the cybernetic guard dogs that can run at the speed of sound. Most novels containing devices like these are usually not part of the spectrum of books considered for prestigious mainstream literary awards.

These elements have a tendency to make the text susceptible to the accusation of escapism, which I have mentioned previously as part of David Larson’s essay. However, the charge as described by Larson is insufficient in a contemporary context. The argument, as posed by Arthur Koestler, is paraphrased by Larson like this:

28 The arrest and incarceration of Y.T. after she delivers the pizza for Hiro (41-50) carries several undertones suggesting that sexism is alive and thriving among those working in the law enforcement and prison businesses.

Koestler argues that serious literature seeks for significance in the familiar; in contrast science fiction, a product of the undisciplined imagination, merely offers escape from everyday concerns. The heroes of science fiction are ultimately boring because “they have tried, experienced, seen and said everything under the sun, and all that is left for them to do is to die of boredom.” Mandel and Fingesten extend the charge as far as it will go. They view science fiction as the symptom of “magnified claustrophobia.” By creating a new mythology to replace the discredited religions of the past, it provides a means of escaping everyday concerns. Rhetorically they ask, “Is not science fiction only one more vain attempt – with new vocabulary and grandiose symbolism – to loose the fetters of life rather than understand them?” Critics of science fiction thus transfer from the novel the old complaints that such reading leads to escapism, fosters neuroses, presents a distorted view of reality, and distracts from the serious business of life. In other words, they accuse science fiction of being psychologically unhealthy, ideologically unsound, and morally irresponsible. (71)

The quotation from Koestler is based on an outmoded idea of what science fiction entails, but nevertheless, it could be that this stereotypical assumption has been kept alive by sf detractors that have no desire to challenge their viewpoint on the genre. Taking this into consideration, we can use *Snow Crash* to demonstrate that despite being a book that contains several elements that could be construed as juvenile entertainment, it still takes place in a complex world that proposes many interesting hypotheses, springing from a few core ideas; one concerning a three-way correlation between neurology, computer programming and linguistics; another about the concept of franchised corporate nation states, and how these would function; another idea concerning the potential of the World Wide Web, which at the time the book was written was still in a state of relative infancy, and how the online world would look if there was a way to physically immerse oneself in a virtual world via the Internet. These ideas are the fundamentals on which *Snow Crash* is built, and these ideas beget questions that are answered with further hypotheses. For instance, what would happen to the federal government of the United States if the area that composes the United States of America as we know them today had been divided into even smaller segments that are bought up and developed into corporate-owned franchulates? In *Snow Crash*, the government appears to be limited to doing two things after its inevitable fragmentation and privatisation: running the FBI, which is now primarily yet another software company as far as the reader is told, and running the Post Office.

As mentioned, Stephenson has also made sure that the reader knows that racism and sexism is still alive and well, which runs counter to the classic sf stereotype inherited from *Star Trek*, which suggests that the enlightened humanity of the future will leave prejudices and stereotypes about race and gender behind. The tacit acknowledgement of the darker sides of human nature implicit in the aversion of an enlightened future without going too far in the opposite direction, instead providing a rich and complex world that allows the reader to weigh the pros and cons of the world depicted without pulling the reader too far in either direction. If Koestler is looking for the familiar in science fiction, he need look

no further than this particular duality: like our own world, there are both good elements and bad elements in it, and it is up to us to decide how we wish to see the world, and what aspects of it we wish to emphasise when we construct our personal worldview.

The familiar hides within all literature – sf or otherwise – that does not fall prey to Sturgeon's Law²⁹, as well as a substantial amount of the literature that does. What is important to recall is the fact that when making a broad statement on a literary genre like science fiction, it would be unreasonable to expect it to withstand extended scrutiny. Strictly speaking, Koestler might not be entirely wrong when he says that serious literature seeks for significance in the familiar, but he is wrong if he expected the science fiction genre as a whole to act as a contrast to his statement, as science fiction is just as capable of utilising the familiar to signify something as other kinds of literature, if not more: the effect of an alien element against which to contrast the familiar fortify our notion of familiarity. We can see an example of this in *Snow Crash* during the pizza delivery scene in the novel's opening; the stakes are much higher than in our world because of the Mafia ownership of the pizza franchise and the extreme measures used as incentives for the drivers to deliver the pizzas on time, but the concept of "thirty minutes or it's free" is based on a slogan that originated with Domino's PizzaTM in 1979³⁰. The contrast between the familiar and the unfamiliar in this context is striking; the familiar slogan and delivery guarantee from a well-known pizza franchise from our own reality is transposed into a fictional world where the same guarantee gains a palpable sense of sinister urgency, on account of the frightening implications for the unlucky driver who happens to deliver a pizza later than thirty minutes.

Through examining the depth and complexity of the world built around the narrative in *Snow Crash*, it has become clear that the novel has capacity for ethical and psychological nuance while keeping the level of both narrative drive and tempo relatively high overall, with action scenes and content that makes *Snow Crash* an entertaining read. However, using the word 'entertaining' about a novel has a tendency to be a loaded description coming from literary critics, reminiscent of the funeral scene in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* when Mark Antony says in his speech that "Brutus is an honorable man". Could a novel be entertaining and possess high literary value at the same time? Or perhaps I should ask, in an attempt to phrase the question in a way that invites a clearer answer: Could a novel provide both escapism and a search for significance in the familiar? This is what the scholars who decry science fiction as escapist literature seem incapable of comprehending, but there is a way to allow a book to do this. If we proceed on the faith that a mark of literary excellence is the ability to elicit a desire to read a book more than once, then a novel can be read first

29 See footnote 5.

30 Source: <<http://www.snopes.com/business/consumer/dominos.asp>>

as escapist fiction, and then a second time as a reflection on designated aspects of real life. Assuming this to be possible, then it is indeed possible to say that a novel can be both intelligent and escapist.

That said, I would not consider *Snow Crash* to be particularly escapist. It is entertaining, quick-witted, and action-packed on one hand, and ambitious, insightful, and erudite on another. Stephenson takes his research seriously, and his ability to implement his ideas into the novel is successful, but not at the expense of the narrative drive. This makes *Snow Crash* a convenient example of the use of ideas and thought experiments in sf, and how to explore the ramifications of these types of ideas and hypotheses in a way that pure theoretical description cannot.

Part IV: Dune

In sharp contrast to the other two primary texts, *Dune* is, at first glance, unconcerned with reflecting the present day. Set in a distant future, laden with religious mysticism and dynastic plots, Frank Herbert's opus sets itself apart from the science fiction norm, yet increases the generic scope of science fiction by building a bridge between the realms of science fiction and fantasy, proving the need for an sf supergenre. For the purpose of this thesis, I will first examine the setting, especially the impact of combining science fiction and fantasy, largely exemplified through the feudal system of government in the novel. Expanding on the examination of the feudal political system, I will then discuss the importance of religion and mysticism in the *Dune* universe, particularly through secret organisations like the Bene Gesserit and the Spacing Guild. Finally, I will examine the use of the 'Hero's Journey', and consider whether the novel, the first in the series, implies the future of Paul Atreides as a messianic tyrant in the sequels.

The intention, through the analysis of these elements, is to ascertain the placement of *Dune* in the sf spectrum as part of the bridge between science fiction and fantasy and how this is done, then to show the depth and complexity of the relations between characters and organisations in the novel, and finally to show that one of Frank Herbert's possible intentions with *Dune* could be to deconstruct the messianic archetype common in both science fiction and fantasy literature. Through these points, I intend to demonstrate how Herbert works with several different thought experiments, and how they all fit together in the *Dune* diegesis. With that in mind, however, I would also attempt to answer the following question towards the end of this section of the thesis: If Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Rowling's *Harry Potter* can be taught or placed on lists of recommended reading in universities, why does *Dune* remain absent?

A Feudal Future: The Consequence of Past Politics in the Future

Most authors of science fiction have a tendency to be somewhat cavalier regarding concepts such as interstellar travel and faster-than-light communication, saying that these are possible through some kind of fictional fuel or technology. Herbert not only takes this a few steps further, but also subverts it by leaving many things unexplained – although the single-commodity economics centred on the spice melange does explain that the spice is used for a wide variety of things in the *Dune* universe, including interstellar travel – but the novel makes it clear that interplanetary and interstellar travel is prohibitively expensive, and instantaneous communication between worlds in the manner of telephones or similar

devices is something that simply does not exist in the *Dune* universe. This obstruction in communications is a major contributing factor to why the political system in *Dune* is the feudal system.

Similarly, the Butlerian jihad – a crusade led against the factions of humanity that employed ‘thinking machines’ several millennia before the story of *Dune* takes place – has effectively created a vacuum in the technological advances of *Dune*’s diegesis where sentient machines would be, which enforces the ties between the novel’s elements of science fiction and fantasy, in the sense that the ‘thinking machines’ have been replaced by ‘mentats’, human beings trained to function as human computers of a sort. Similarly, shield technology has made ranged weapons far less useful than in the present day³¹, and thus close combat using knives and swords is the preferred mode of combat. In short, Herbert uses technology – and even the absence of a specific type of technology – and the futuristic premises to build a fantasy setting in space. But he does not stop there; alien biological compounds like sapho extract and the spice melange bring to mind a biological and psychological variation of Clarke’s Third Law, which in its original form states that ‘any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic’. Through this mutation of Clarke’s Third Law, Herbert allows for the creation of a set of near-magical abilities that are nevertheless scientifically explicable in the *Dune* diegesis, and allows for a bridging of science fiction and fantasy literature.

The political structure of the *Dune* universe, as mentioned, is portrayed as a necessity due to the effort required for interplanetary and interstellar travel, compounded by the absence of faster-than-light communications and the monopolisation of the spacefaring industry by the Spacing Guild. As this might suggest, the Spacing Guild plays a major part in maintaining the balance of power. The power structure in the Imperium in *Dune* is tripartite: the Guild forms one third of the balance, as does the Imperial House – which for most of the novel is House Corrino – and the final third is the Landsraad, a parliament of the ruling Houses (Herbert 37). Understanding the political structure similarly helps the reader understand why the plot unfolds in the way it does. As it stands when the story begins, the Houses Atreides and Harkonnen have been locked in a formal feud (called a ‘kanly’) for several generations, and House Atreides has proven itself exceedingly popular with most other major Houses in the Landsraad. This troubles the Padishah Emperor Shaddam IV, who sees Duke Leto Atreides as a direct threat to his rule, and so he allows

31 Shielding technology in *Dune* is susceptible to something called “the Holtzman effect”. Essentially, this means that if a laser weapon strikes a personal shield, the shield explodes with such massive violence that the assailant is extremely likely to perish along with the target. (DiTommaso 313)

House Harkonnen to act on their vendetta against House Atreides by way of a complicated gambit with Arrakis as both prize and bait for the Harkonnen trap.

Arrakis, or Dune, the desert planet, is a prize without peer in the Imperium. The sole source of the spice melange, Arrakis is also the home of the Fremen, a nomadic and tribal nation who have adapted to life on the planet, and who have chafed under the stewardship of House Harkonnen. Duke Leto Atreides fully understands the risk of accepting the fiefdom of Arrakis, as it is made clear that this could only be a trap; the popularity of House Atreides in the Landsraad makes Leto a threat to the power of the sitting Emperor, and since Atreides and Harkonnen have been locked in a feud for millennia, Leto has all the more reason to suspect dishonest intent. Despite this, he knows he has to accept the fiefdom of Arrakis, while preparing for every foreseeable contingency. The trap backfires in a way – while it kills Duke Leto, it also kills Baron Vladimir Harkonnen and his heir-presumptive, Feyd-Rautha, and leads to the ousting of Emperor Shaddam IV, making way for Paul Atreides, realised as both the Kwisatz Haderach of the Bene Gesserit and the Lisan al-Gaib of the Fremen, who ascends the Golden Lion Throne³² and takes the former Emperor's daughter Irulan Corrino as his wife in a purely political marriage. Paul's leverage in all of this is Arrakis itself – with his realised status as the proverbial *Übermensch* prophesised by the Bene Gesserit breeding program as well as the assistance of the Fremen, Paul can destroy the source of the spice melange, which could throw the entire Imperium into disarray.

The potential for complete disaster can be explained by the precarious nature of the situation between the power players in the Imperium. While direct rule is exacted by the noble Houses of the Landsraad and the Padishah Emperor, this power has little to say without the secretive Spacing Guild and CHOAM³³, a vast mercantile organisation that controls pretty much all commodities that can be bought or sold, including melange. Management and directorship in CHOAM is controlled by the Padishah Emperor and the Landsraad. The Spacing Guild is dependent on melange – the Guild Navigator employs a spice-induced trance to fold and navigate space – and CHOAM controls melange, which makes the Guild and CHOAM co-dependent; the Guild needs melange, and CHOAM needs interstellar travel. As such, the power of the Imperium hinges on this balance. When Paul suddenly possesses the power to utterly destroy the supply of melange, this power threatens to upset the balance of power between CHOAM and the Guild, an upset that neither the Guild nor CHOAM can afford, and since Paul wants control over the Imperium, this threat forces the Emperor's hand. The allegory is fairly explicit – CHOAM

32 The name of the Padishah Emperor's throne.

33 CHOAM stands for Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles.

is OPEC, according to Herbert himself.³⁴ Modern readers may even be surprised to see the serendipitous foresight exhibited by Herbert in *Dune*, as in 1973, approximately eight years after the book was first published, the OPEC countries did indeed threaten an oil embargo, reminiscent of the way Paul threatens to destroy the spice at the source as leverage against the Emperor and the Spacing Guild in the novel.

Another question a modern reader may ask is why there was no contingency plan against the Fremen doing what they did under Paul's leadership. The short answer is, quite simply, because of the faufreluches³⁵ and 'the Great Convention'. This, essentially, is the reasons given for the extensive compartmentalising of the social classes, and also the reason why the Harkonnen trap manages to unfold almost exactly according to Baron Vladimir Harkonnen's plan: there is so little communication outside the social stations that the identity of the traitor – Wellington Yueh, Duke Leto's personal physician, a doctor of the Suk school that has undergone Imperial conditioning – is effectively kept secret until it is too late. Yueh evades suspicion by way of his status – Imperial conditioning is said to be unsubvertible (31), and yet the Harkonnens still managed to blackmail Yueh into betraying his Duke. Lorenzo DiTommaso lists further examples of this kind of political blindness, including the lack of information on the Fremen gathered or possessed by people like Duke Leto, Baron Harkonnen, or Staban Tuek; Thufir Hawat's inability to suspect the powers of the Bene Gesserit, and Jessica's inability to decipher the Harkonnen battle language (315).

The de facto effects of the Great Convention and the faufreluches also include the stagnation of the social classes, which do not interact in any meaningful way until the relatively compassionate House Atreides arrives on Arrakis, exemplified by such gestures as Duke Leto's willingness to violate the Harkonnen customs on Arrakis out of disgust for the Harkonnen indulgence in hedonism (206-7). Later, as Paul and his mother, Lady Jessica, start their association with the Fremen of Sietch Tabr, they continue the process of harnessing the might of the Fremen for their cause started by Pardot Kynes and his son, Liet-Kynes, a process which culminates in the Fremen seizure of Arrakis under the leadership of Paul, and the fulfillment of Paul's vengeance against House Harkonnen. As a consequence, House Corrino is stripped of most of its political power when Shaddam IV is forced to abdicate. While House Corrino retains some vestigial elements of power – Paul's claim to the Golden Lion throne is cemented with his political marriage to Shaddam's Bene Gesserit daughter Irulan, and House Corrino remains in power over their homeworld

34 Source: <<http://web.archive.org/web/20080616111957/http://www.dunenovels.com/news/genesis.html>>

35 Faufreluches is the insistence on rank and place within the society of the Imperium. (Herbert 840)

of Salusa Secundus, which presides over the Sardaukar³⁶ training facilities – the Imperium is definitely not the same at the end of the novel.

My Name is a Killing Word: Religion in Dune and Subversion of the Monomyth

One might think that the Bene Gesserit would be an incredible political force, on account of their strategic importance in the imperium – Lady Jessica, Duke Leto's concubine and de facto wife, is a Bene Gesserit; as is the Emperor's eldest daughter, Princess Irulan and Margot Fenring, the wife of the Emperor's advisor and confidante, Count Hasimir Fenring. However, despite their political influence, the Bene Gesserit do not possess political power in the same way as the Landsraad or the Spacing Guild, preferring instead to further their agenda in secret through acting as political advisors and truthsayers, and their matriarchal structure makes the Bene Gesserit particularly well suited to exert leverage as consorts of various members of the noble Houses. Just as interesting, however, is the power they have over religion through a subsection of their order called Missionaria Protectiva, and the Panoplia Propheticus program. This is the most likely explanation for why the Fremen have prophecies of their own – at least as far as they believe – that predict a messianic character possessing similar abilities to those that the Kwisatz Haderach, the Bene Gesserit's own prophesised prophet, is said to possess. Distinguishing the Bene Gesserit from the civilisations they have practiced religious engineering on, such as the Fremen, is the fact that they are actively working toward the creation of the Kwisatz Haderach through their breeding program, as opposed to placing faith in outer forces.

It is implied that their political machinations largely exist to serve this purpose, and that the birth of Paul Atreides would have been a catastrophe had it not been for the fact that Paul was the Kwisatz Haderach, born a generation early. This turn of events is, curiously enough, foreshadowed by its name, as the glossary translates Kwisatz Haderach to “the shortening of the way”, which could be interpreted as referring to the alternate interpretation of the meaning of the Kwisatz Haderach: “he who is many places at once”, but which can also be interpreted as a reference to the fact that he is also a result of the Bene Gesserit breeding program being disobeyed, thus giving them their Kwisatz Haderach a generation early. Originally, Jessica was supposed to bear Duke Leto a daughter, who would be trained as a Bene Gesserit, and married to the Harkonnen heir-presumptive Feyd-Rautha, and the son resulting from their relationship would be the Kwisatz Haderach,

36 The Sardaukar is the Imperial Royal Guard, distinguished as a group of ruthless soldiers fiercely loyal to the Padishah Emperor. (Herbert 855-6)

and in the process ending the Atreides-Harkonnen feud. Since the Kwisatz Haderach is also said to be able to become what is essentially a male Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother, undergoing the same ritual and giving him a more complete access to the Other Memory – the memories of their ancestors – not just of the female line, but also the male line. Add to this a more precise prescience than the Bene Gesserit can normally attain, he would become a ‘perfect’ Emperor, at least according to the Bene Gesserit themselves, who would logically benefit immensely from having direct control over the Emperor.

Instead, the Kwisatz Haderach comes a generation early, practically erases the main Harkonnen bloodline apart from the strain carried within the Atreides line, gets coronated Emperor by way of blackmailing the Spacing Guild and Emperor Shaddam Corrino, and explicitly turns against the Bene Gesserit for their manipulative ways, which have been guiding him towards the epicentre of a new jihad, a massive holy war that will span the known universe. The curious distinction between most messianic archetypes and Paul is Paul’s personal secularity – his own mythology is not dependent on his own belief (List 29). Through the Missionaria Protectiva, the Bene Gesserit thus extend their influence over religion in the Fremen culture, inadvertently placing the key to Paul’s victory over the Emperor and House Harkonnen in his hands when Paul and Jessica flee into the deep desert of Arrakis. Much like Paul’s attitude to his own mythology, their use of the Panoplia Prophetica suggests that the Bene Gesserit do not pay the mythology any particular heed apart from what they are able to scry on their own. To them, the Kwisatz Haderach is strongly implied to be the means to a political end – a Bene Gesserit emperor. This distinction could as a consequence have some curious implications regarding Herbert’s use of religion in *Dune*; while the prescient abilities of the Bene Gesserit are all but confirmed to be true, as is the legend of the Kwisatz Haderach, religion is treated as a means of manipulation more than a fact. The manipulation of the Bene Gesserit makes Paul resentful, but his desire to break free of external control proves futile when he realises that by seeing the future and trying to change it, he is still doomed to follow his clairvoyant visions.

With *Dune*, Frank Herbert takes aim at an ancient tale – the Hero’s Journey as outlined in Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* – and turns it on its head. There are hints throughout the novel that Paul’s reign as Emperor will cause death on an unprecedented scale, and once Paul fully realises his powers of clairvoyance, he becomes aware of this and takes measures to attempt to prevent it, but eventually realises that it cannot be stopped. It is a curious Hero’s Journey that results in a massive war spanning the Known Universe, although the events do come to pass in *Dune Messiah*, the 1969 sequel to *Dune*. While I do have to acknowledge that *Dune Messiah* and the subsequent sequel novels exist and that this massive jihad eventually takes place, I will not use it to

support my arguments, but instead use the knowledge of the upcoming jihad in the name of Muad'Dib³⁷ to find foreshadowing in *Dune*. Largely, this will concern the prescient visions Paul has after realising his potential as the Kwisatz Haderach.

As previously mentioned, Paul has visions of a massive war that will engulf the entire Known Universe, and he wishes to counteract this. He countermands the traditions of the Fremen as their Lisan al-Gaib, the "Voice from the Outer World", to assure his control over them in a manner that grants him a better power base. As the story progresses, Paul becomes increasingly callous and Machiavellian, as noted by Gurney Halleck at one point:

"What's the extent of the storm damage?" Paul asked.

"In the direct path – on the landing field across the spice storage yards of the plain – extensive damage," Gurney said. "As much from the battle as from the storm."

"Nothing money won't repair, I presume," Paul said.

"Except for the lives, m'Lord," Gurney said, and there was a tone of reproach in his voice as though to say: "*When did an Atrides worry first about things when there were people at stake?*"

But Paul could only focus his attention on the inner eye and the gaps visible to him in the time-wall that still lay across his path. Through each gap the jihad raged away down the corridors of the future. (758-9)

Halleck's observation notes the increased ruthlessness in Paul's *modus operandi* with concern, seeing as it is uncharacteristic of him and his family, who are noted for their compassion for those under their command. This is important to note as it hints that Paul is becoming less what he wants to become, and more a slave to his own prescience. While he still wants to avoid the jihad he sees in his visions, Paul will end up instigating it no matter what he does, after which he will simply resort to attempts at limiting the damage done in his name. Curiously enough, Paul is adamant in his desire to be free of any attempts to be controlled by the Bene Gesserit, but will eventually succumb to the tyranny of his own visions.

At this point, I need to make a slight diversion from the subject of prescience. While later novels in the *Dune* series make this connection explicit, those familiar with classical mythology will likely have recognised the surname Atrides as meaning 'sons of Atreus', referring to Agamemnon and Menelaus, the sons of Atreus, who play major parts in various Greek epics, including Homer's *Iliad* and Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. It is highly unlikely that the relation to classical epics is coincidental, and I will elaborate on some of the possible causes for Herbert's name-checking of classic Greek aristocracy in the next section. The reason for mentioning this connection here is to affirm the sense of familiarity that permeates *Dune*.

37 Paul takes the name "Paul-Muad'Dib" when he is accepted among the Fremen. It is named for a species of rodent native to Arrakis.

On account of the far future setting of the novel, and no part of the novel taking place on Earth, the alien setting is offset by the increased amount of familiar semantic elements from the distant past, such as the feudal system of government, the religious themes, and the use of the monomyth. Calling the protagonist and his family Atreides further encases the novel in familiar territory, connecting the *Dune* universe once more to Earth, this time through classical mythology.

Despite the references to the familiar, Herbert still makes it clear that this is not a classic monomyth story. Paul claims he is not the Kwisatz Haderach at one point, even as he realises the prophesised potential, claiming that he is “something unexpected” instead (322). This might be Herbert’s way of making it clear to the reader that Paul is not the typical messianic hero, despite being a kind of messianic archetype. As opposed to the stereotypical hero, whose entry onto the battlefield when fully realised will precipitate an end to the conflict at hand, Paul’s realisation as the Kwisatz Haderach, or the unexpected entity he claims to be, is destined to bring a war even greater than the Atreides-Harkonnen feud. The realities of the oncoming jihad are only realised in *Dune Messiah*, but the path is implied to be staked out already for Paul once he starts to realise his destiny as the Kwisatz Haderach:

He suddenly saw how fertile was the ground into which he had fallen, and with this realization, the terrible purpose filled him, creeping through the empty place within, threatening to choke him with grief.

He had seen two main branchings along the way ahead – in one he confronted an evil old baron and said: “Hello, Grandfather.” The thought of that path and what lay along it sickened him.

The other path held long patches of grey obscurity except for peaks of violence. He had seen a warrior religion there, a fire spreading across the universe with the Atreides green and black banner waving at the head of fanatic legions drunk on spice liquor. Gurney Halleck and a few other of his father’s men – a pitiful few – were among them, all marked with the hawk symbol from the shrine of his father’s skull. (323)

Donald Palumbo notes in his essay on the use of what he calls the “fractal monomyth” in the *Dune* series that Norman Spinrad, in his essay ‘Emperor of Everything’, has observed the tragic cautionary tale that hides in Herbert’s monomythical Paul:

[Spinrad] recognizes that Paul is tragically aware of his failure to “transcend his transcendence” and that such tragic irony “makes the first three books in the *Dune* series... a mordant commentary on the story of the Hero with a Thousand Faces... instead of a masturbatory power fantasy”. (437)

The comment on the “masturbatory power fantasy” brings to the forefront a particularly uncomfortable truth about the monomythical hero. Herbert invokes the ‘white saviour complex’ in the story of Paul’s ascension to the Golden Lion Throne when Paul

becomes the spiritual leader of the Fremmen, but despite Paul's adaptation to the Fremmen customs and lifestyle, he knowingly exploits their messianic prophecy as implemented by the Missionaria Protectiva, and it is implied that Paul is not particularly comfortable in his role as a prophet or messiah figure, which is one of the reasons for his rebellion against the Bene Gesserit machinations that he is the product of. While it is not uncommon for monomythical heroes to consider their role a burden, Paul has a twofold problem that compounds his already considerable burden. First of all, he either has no way of stopping the jihad or he sees the alternative to the jihad too reprehensible to even consider. Second, he is the product of a complex breeding program gone awry, which means that he may embody the abilities of the Kwisatz Haderach that the Bene Gesserit was seeking, but he is an anomaly to them and to himself; as he slowly realises that while he has purpose, this purpose is taxing on his conscience, as he is going to be responsible for a religious genocide. And because Paul can see into the possible futures, he becomes increasingly trapped by his own determinism brought on by his prescience.

Paul Atreides becomes a more complex character when viewed as a subversion of the monomythical hero, but when reading *Dune* on its own, it is entirely possible to read Paul as a straight example of the monomyth. Such a reading would likely suffer from a perceived banality, but it seems likely that Herbert intended this reading of the first novel, so that *Dune Messiah* could pull the proverbial rug out from under the reader's feet. That said, *Dune* is laden with signs of things to come, and a close reading can definitely show these signs as evidence that Paul is a subversion of the Campbellian monomythical hero.

That Place Where You Dare Not Look: Where is *Dune* on the Reading Lists?

The universe Herbert created with *Dune* has influenced several authors since, both in science fiction and in fantasy, but the novel's combination of science fiction and fantasy, exemplified by the use of political systems from the past, as well as the use of technology to give the universe the familiar feeling of classic 'sword and sorcery'-style fantasy literature, makes the novel a codifier of the modern space opera. Elements of fantasy and science fiction were not just blended in such a way that it served the narrative and the character gallery as opposed to serving the setting, but the setting treads the fine balance between prominence and internal consistency that can often be problematic for sf novels set in distant futures and on distant worlds, as the author has to resist the temptation to deliver too much irrelevant exposition concerning the setting and the universe constructed, while at the same time making sure that the reader understands how the more vital aspects of the universe works.

Having explored how the universe works, and the many ideas Herbert has worked into the narrative, there is something that seems, if not unfair, then at least strange or unusual: the *Dune* universe is no more arcane or cryptic than Tolkien's Legendarium³⁸ or the wizard world of the *Harry Potter* novel series, but *Dune* is not as well known. Why is this the case? Critics have compared *Dune* to *Lord of the Rings* when it comes to both style and scope, yet *Dune* has not penetrated the public consciousness to a similar extent. This situation could have several explanations, but common among both *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* as far as modern reception is concerned are the incredibly successful film franchises these films spawned just after the turn of the millennium, which brought the books out to a new audience. The adaptational history of *Dune*, on the other hand, is infamously chequered. After an aborted project in the early 1970s helmed by director Alejandro Jodorowsky, *Dune* eventually became a finished film in 1984, directed by David Lynch. The 1984 film became a spectacular critical and commercial failure. A miniseries adaptation by Sci-Fi Channel³⁹ in 2000, titled *Frank Herbert's Dune*, fared somewhat better, and was followed by a sequel that adapted *Dune Messiah* and *Children of Dune* into a single miniseries called *Frank Herbert's Children of Dune*. Despite good reviews, the two miniseries have not helped the novels gain any broad mainstream appeal.

The potential implications are myriad, but we may assume, for the sake of the argument, that the adaptations have had no effect on the mainstream success of the *Dune* franchise due to a combination of flaws – the film (launched in 1984) suffered for its troubled production and subsequent box office failure; and the miniseries, despite good critical reception, were distributed on a specialised channel, which minimised their exposure to peripheral demographics as a result. While there are other factors involved in the explanation, these seem to be the most apparent and least disputable explanations for both adaptations' lack of success, at least without confronting the source material. The source material is a factor worth considering – the narrative style of the novels may not lend itself well to adaptations, which is not necessarily to the detriment of the novels. Points of view shift rapidly in the *Dune* books, allowing insight into the minds of not just one character, but almost every central character and the occasional ancillary character as well, giving each of these characters an increased degree of complexity.

However, placing the blame solely on the lack of a successful adaptation – or on the novel's apparent resistance against a satisfactory screen adaptation – is facetious. *Lord of the Rings* fostered a devoted fanbase in the 1960s, long before any large-scale film adaptation

38 The universe in which Tolkien placed most of his fiction, in particular *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, is referred to as Tolkien's Legendarium.

39 Currently known as Syfy.

of the novel was even attempted. As previously stated, there could be any number of explanations for this state of affairs, and more likely than not the answer is a combination of several factors. Jon Michaud of *The New Yorker* suggests offhandedly that the absence of robots and computers kept *Dune* from reaching out to fans of science fiction.⁴⁰ The initial reaction may be to dismiss this commentary as patronising guesswork, but Michaud's seemingly crass generalisation touches on something important – the divide between science fiction and fantasy. Again, this has been mentioned, but the universe Herbert begat with *Dune* bridges this divide, and thus it might be pertinent to think that *Dune* could have lost its potential mainstream audience by deciding not to be explicitly either science fiction or fantasy literature. The Butlerian Jihad, lest we forget, also instigated a spiritual awakening, which means that the people are the focus of *Dune* rather than the technology, according to Michaud.

Could the introduction of religious mysticism into a science fiction context be the root of the problem? Possibly, but not on its own. What about the opposite – were readers reluctant to accept the possibility that a novel set in the future would look to the distant past for its political systems and mythology? Again, it is improbable that this would be the sole cause of the current state of affairs. Perhaps the novel suffers from an over-reliance on dialogue and inner monologue? Considering how well-paced the novel is, this does not seem likely. The speculation could go on, but it does not seem feasible that it would yield any satisfactory result, so we might as well leave that train of thought there. Suffice to say that *Dune* has somehow managed to remain in the margins of the popular consciousness, which may have halted *Dune's* entrance into university syllabi – as part of a pop culture phenomenon. Curiously, this implies a paradox – *Dune* is not well enough entrenched in popular culture to be taught as a phenomenon, despite the fact that it sold more than 12 million copies in Herbert's lifetime. This line of inquiry seem to leave us with more questions than answers, but I will ask another question: if a literature class at university level is dedicated to exploring the monomyth, for example, could one not in that context read *Dune* as a criticism of the Campbellian model? The answer is emphatically yes. *Dune* can also be read in a class on fantasy literature as an example of the grey area between the science fiction and fantasy genres. A class on the classical epics could benefit from having *Dune* on its list of recommended reading, as Herbert draws inspiration from classical mythology for building the mythology in the *Dune* diegesis.

In short, *Dune* has a wide range of literary applicability, and the failure to harness this and use it in academic contexts is missing an opportunity to engage students in the subject through what is considered to be an exercise in world-building with only three

40 Source: <<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/07/dune-endures.html>>

peers in post-nineteenth century literature: Tolkien's *Legendarium*, C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* novels, and Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Among these, *Dune* singles itself out through its premise, explicitly set on distant worlds in a distant future, creating a bridge between the world of science fiction and the world of fantasy literature, bringing the two worlds together through literary hypotheses and speculation on one end, and mythology – particularly the Campbellian monomyth – and classical imagery on the other.

Conclusion

Through the examples of the three books I have examined as part of this thesis, I have highlighted a specific aspect or problem with the way sf literature is read. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not only a highly regarded novel, but it is also a text that has the potential to raise the credibility of the genre as a whole, as it consistently proves itself to be relevant to our society. *Snow Crash* is an intelligent novel in disguise, hiding complex ideas about a connection between linguistics, computer programming, and religion behind a surface of fast-paced action and copious amount of cool. *Dune* constructs an incredibly rich universe around a traditional monomythical Hero's Journey story with a twist, which is set against the backdrop of feuding nobles in space.

The epithet 'literature of ideas' is often used about science fiction, and each of the three texts examined in this thesis demonstrate how ideas can be used to enhance a narrative, but they do so in distinctly different ways that nevertheless affirms their affiliations with sf. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* creates its association with sf through both its placement in the future – whether that future happens to actually be the year 1984 in that diegesis or not – and its central idea concerning the potential for totalitarian rule in the future. *Snow Crash*, on the other hand identifies itself as sf mainly through the political and technological differences from our reality. *Dune* uses several signifiers to indicate that it is set in an sf universe; being set on other planets, unusual terms and phrases in the language, and explicitly setting the novel in a far-flung future year⁴¹. There is very little that connects these novels together, apart from their familial connection through the sf label, but they all can be said to be using their narratives to examine the ideas that form constituent parts of their premises.

Nineteen Eighty-Four is explicitly political and dystopian in its design, and discusses at length the ramifications of totalitarian rule, showcasing the surveillance state, its methods, and its consequences from the perspective of a middle class everyman living under the watchful eye of Big Brother. The book can be said to be a long form answer to the question: 'What would a totalitarian regime have to do to stay in power?' To answer this, Orwell gives the reader a viewpoint, Winston Smith, and through Winston's attempts to comprehend the world around him, the reader gets to see how the Party maintains a staggering amount of façades and essentially eradicates the essence of humanity in its subjects in order to maintain its power. In the end, while Winston realises that there is no feasible way for him to topple the Party, everything the Party does is equally futile in the end, as the explicit goal of the Party is simply to retain their power, and the single-minded

41 The year *Dune* is set in is specified as being 10 191 AG (After Guild) which is roughly 20 000 years into our future.

nature of this desire locks them in a circular pattern, in the end accomplishing nothing of value to others or themselves.

Snow Crash is less explicitly about a single topic and less clear about whether the world it is set in is a dystopia, but it looks at the potential of a wide scope of ideas, from the connection between programming languages and spoken languages and the idea of a source code for the human brain, to the potential of the Internet as a platform for online interaction and what a reader in 2014 recognises as social networking. As opposed to Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Stephenson raises several questions about what the world is like, and each answer contributes in some way to making the world he designs increasingly cohesive and consistent. For instance, if the US government is essentially useless in this world, what does the CIA do? It goes private, merges with the Library of Congress, and rebrands itself the Central Intelligence Corporation, or CIC, and becomes, essentially, a database of information maintained by millions of stringers. And if the zoning laws have been taken to the extreme where franchised consulates of privately owned states dot the landscape and make delivery a mess, how does this world handle that? Make the delivery people highly trained professionals in high-risk jobs, and in the process boost the action levels. What will happen to computer technology and the Internet in this future? Virtual Reality and a vast online landscape called the Metaverse that allows a level of interconnectivity that would not arrive in our world before the arrival of social media, which is an impressive set of predictions considering the fact that *Snow Crash* was released in 1992.

Dune explores everything that gives the universe the story is set in an opportunity to show itself as a living and breathing entity, and as such delves into various ideas spanning fields like politics, religion, ecology, economics, trade, and prescience, all of which are meticulously researched and adapted for the diegesis. The universe is built to be larger than the narrative it frames, without trying to fit everything into the story. Extraneous details and elements that cannot be explicated in a narratively sound manner are left in the appendices, leaving the story free to hint at the true size of the universe it is placed in. *Dune* has a protagonist that the reader expects to be another messianic hero, but who proves instead to be a messianic anti-hero: ruthless, rebellious, and bound – predestined, even – to fulfill his own prescient vision of being the harbinger of an intergalactic holy war. Replete with imagery from classical literature, explicit symbolism and extensive literary applicability, *Dune* can be many different things to different readers, but the grandeur of the story is palpable in its narrative, and it can quickly convince the reader that the story told is larger than life. This brings the book closer to a status as modern-day mythology in potentia set in the future instead of the past.

The ideas associated with sf are important to the literary discourse in that they are among the very few – if not the only – ideas that look out toward the future. Unlike Paul Atreides, we cannot see the future in a literal sense, but we can make educated guesses, and these become ideas. The only way we can prepare for the problems of the future is through speculation, and speculative fiction is called by that name for a reason – the sf ideas are hypotheses on what could happen at time X given circumstances Y and Z, and until prescience becomes a part of our world, speculation is our only way of anticipating events that can happen in the future. Speculation of this sort can be done across a wide variety of fields and to a variable extent, which suggests the larger and more nebulous definition of speculative fiction is the most desired one. Orwell, Herbert and Stephenson made three strikingly different novels that can all be placed within the sf spectrum, and they wrote them in very different ways, and these different ways presented different ideas, yet all of these ideas look into the future and the potential of the future, which is a common denominator between these novels.

Perhaps Rieder's second proposition is wrong – perhaps sf does, after all, have a unifying characteristic. Maybe this characteristic is what Bova calls “the willingness – and freedom – to examine any idea and stretch it to its limits” (800), and this is what makes sf meritorious literature. This is certainly a defensible position, but what would it mean if Rieder's second proposition is correct? It would certainly suggest that sf is not unified by a single characteristic, but rather several different characteristics, thereby complicating the classification of any given novel as sf. Yet the three sf novels, all of which are disparate in origins, style, and subgenres, emerged as connected through their use of central ideas that their premises spring out from. An anti-essentialist view on sf does not preclude three novels sharing at least one defining sf characteristic, so it may not have any effect on Rieder's second proposition at all. The idea may not be an essential unifying characteristic in sf, but it might be an element that separates the outstanding sf literature from the ninety percent that falls victim to Sturgeon's Law. At any rate, it must be said that the use of ideas in an sf context is exceedingly nebulous for a unifying characteristic – in fact, it might be too diffuse to be used as a defining trait at all. But what is it supposed to be then? A possible suggestion could be that the idea, at least the way we understand it as part of the sf genre, could be understood as an intrinsic element of the sf label, rather than one of the many traits that defines a literary work as sf. However, this is only conjecture – the legitimacy of Rieder's second proposition does not need to be contested for the purpose of this thesis.

This thesis has shown that the three novels examined in this study are not only good representatives of the sf genre, but also have literary merits which would make them

excellent candidates for a literary canon – but they have not been accepted as such: the hope is that the present work may contribute towards the acceptance of not just these works, but of the genre as a whole, and that the literary study of sf will become a more prominent element of academic discourse on literature in the years to come.

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